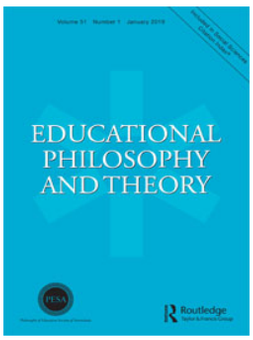

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EDITORIAL

Check for updates

US sovereignty must not be defended: Critical education against Russiagate

Peters (2018) has correctly noted that the election of Trump has ushered in a new war against academia. And yet it seems that critical scholars in academia have yet to respond in kind. They are instead swept up in Russiagate.

It seems that almost every other day there is a new 'smoking gun' in Russiagate. And yet one year into the investigation by the federal government, we still have not seen one piece of concrete evidence that Russia either colluded with the Trump campaign or interfered in the US election. What we have instead are baseless assertions, sloppy reporting (even fake news), witch-hunting, and xenophobia. Taken as a whole, Russiagate is debilitating the real resistance in the US, escalating the US war machine, and shifting the political spectrum in the country even more to the right.

The real fake news

Take, for example, the 'Intelligence' Community Assessment (2017) report released in January 2017, which, says there is 'high confidence' of Russian interference. 'High confidence,' as the document says (on the very last page of course), 'does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong' (p. 13). How critical do we need to be to be skeptical of the report? And what is in the report?

Seven out of the 20 pages of text of the public document—*35 percent of the report!*—is dedicated to Russia Today's coverage of 'divisive' issues in the US. As evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election, they highlight RT's coverage of Occupy Wall Street, the anti-fracking movement, third-party political candidates, the surveillance state, corporate greed and corruption, and critiques of US foreign policy and wars.

RT features a range of voices on its programs, voices that don't find expression on the mainstream channels. Some of the voices are progressive, some are reactionary, and some are mainstream. It's important to note that Abby Martin, who hosted the popular 'Breaking the Set' show that was cited in the DNI report (which, by the way, ended in 2015!), denounced Russia's involvement in Crimea on the air. She wasn't fired or reprimanded, and in fact her show ran for another year, even though *The New York Times* falsely reported that she quit on the air (Martin, 2017). I listen to two daily Sputnik podcasts: *By Any Means Necessary with Eugene Puryear* and *Loud and Clear with Brian Becker*. They started in 2016, and they were *ruthlessly* critical of Trump *and* Clinton. In fact, both Puryear and Becker were—and are—leading organizers of the anti-Trump movement.

It is true that RT is owned by the Russian state (and Sputnik), just as Al-Jazeera is owned by the Qatari state (royal family, really), PressTV is owned by the Iranian state, and Voice of America is owned by the US state.

RT and Sputnik were forced to register as foreign agents, and Congress revoked RT's press credentials. Moreover, *independent* news groups are also being swept up in the smear campaign. In November 2016, the *Washington Post* ran a story about 'Russian propaganda' news sites (Timberg, 2016), that was based largely on a website ran by 'experts,' PropOrNot.com. And yet, as Norton and Greenwald (2016)

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pointed out, the *Post* didn't name one single individual from the organization. The Executive Director was quoted on the condition of anonymity. As Norton and Greenwald state, 'the individuals behind this newly created group are publicly branding journalists and news outlets as tools of Russian propaganda — even calling on the FBI to investigate them for espionage — while cowardly hiding their own identities.' Named in the report was the Black radical website Black Agenda Report (to which this author has contributed). This slandering of any news sites critical of the Clinton machine or Russiagate has continued, and isn't likely to stop.

Everyone should be skeptical of state-owned media, but it shouldn't be censored. Yet that is what is effectively happening. And state-owned media isn't necessarily any less or more biased than corporate-owned media. In the US, the media is controlled by 15 billionaires (Vinton, 2016). And this is one of the stranger things that's happened over the past year: with Russian-owned or even affiliated media and people and organizations demonized, other media are presented as *objective* or *neutral*. This is incredibly dangerous, as these media outlets promote the ideological positions of those 15 billionaires. During the Iraq War, all corporate-owned media closed ranks with the Pentagon, running editorial after editorial about why we had to go to war against the independent sovereign country (Foser, 2010).

In Russiagate, the media is accountable to no one. And the false news claims only work to give fuel to Trump's fire. Maté (2017) recently ran a piece in *The Nation* denoting a few of the more egregious fake news stories that have been spread. First, he notes than in September news spread that Russian hackers hacked 21 states' voting systems, but that in November a cyber-security official told a House panel 'The majority of the activity was simple scanning.' Only C-SPAN and Sputnik News covered this correction. Second, and even more disturbing, he points to the CNN story that Wikileaks offered Trump hacked emails from the DNC before their release. CNN said that 'multiple sources' confirmed the email. It turns out, of course, that the email was sent *after* they were already publicly released. This is what passes for 'resistance' journalism in the Trump age.

What democracy?

Russiagate has even painted entire opposition movements in the US as Russian agents or dupes. When Facebook turned over 'Russian-bought ads' (which, by the way, have never been linked to Putin or a pro-Putin force), they found ads for Black Lives Matter events. Now, $150,000 of Facebook ads can't exactly swing an election, but that didn't stop the speculation. Valle (2017) correctly argued that this speculation only serves to discredit activist organizations. They also smeared the legacy of the Black liberation movement in the US by painting Black communist organizers in the early twentieth century as nothing but Soviet spies. In her takedown of this anti-Black Russiagate campaign, Lindsay (2017) notes:

> These assertions deny the agency of African Americans, many of whom were amongst the most prominent Black intellectuals of their time, who looked to the Soviet system as an alternative to American racism and exploitation. This interpretation also denies the real solidarity and support that the Soviet Union expressed in their assistance to liberation movements of many Black, brown and oppressed people all over the world.

Lindsay goes on to relay the facts about the tremendous cooperation between the Soviet Union and the heroics of the Black liberation struggle (see Kelley, 1990, for starters).

The narrative of Russiagate is that the US is a democracy, a free society that is threatened by Russia and the evil Putin. But, as Lindsay argues powerfully in the opening to her article, 'Black Bolsheviks, White Lies:'

> A lot of nonsense has been written about the role of Putin's Russia in subverting "our democracy." As though our democracy had been functioning perfectly (even reasonably) well, until these shadowy Russian forces purchased a few Facebook ads that sent us all into the streets. It's a laughable concept. I'm sorry, did Putin acquit George Zimmerman or Jason Stockley? Did Putin shoot 12-year-old Tamir Rice? Russia did not carry out the drug war against African Americans or implement policies of mass incarceration, or pass voter ID laws in the U.S.—all of which have contributed to disenfranchising millions of African Americans over the years. The U.S. has a lot to answer for with regard to systematically denying the democratic rights of African Americans and this is not the first time they've tried to deflect criticism for that by blaming Russia.

Can one interfere in a democracy if such a democracy doesn't exist? Can one have sovereignty on stolen land?

And what counts as interference? Was it interference when US election consultants helped an unpopular Boris Yeltsin get re-elected in 1996? After his election, TIME magazine ran a cover which read 'Yanks to the Rescue: The Secret Story of how American Advisers Helped Yeltsin Win' (Gardner, 2017). Was it interference when, right before the Brexit vote, then-US President Barack Obama held a press conference saying that, if Brexit passes, Britain would 'move to the back of the queue' for US trade agreements (Palmer, 2016)? Was it interference when the US invaded Panama and kidnapped its president, Manuel Noriega? Was it interference when the US trained and armed sectarian rebels in Syria? Or when they bombed Libya to overthrow Gaddafi?

This should be the role of critical education in the present moment (and it's really no different from the previous moments): critique everything. Critique Trump, but also critique Russiagate and its proponents; critique RT but also critique *The New York Times*; critique Russia but also critique the US, and do so with some perspective (e.g. what is Russia's military budget compared to the US's? How many Russian military bases surround the US, and how many US bases surround Russia?). And what exactly is the Russian Federation? What is Putin's relationship to it? Does he single-handedly control every institution there? Or is there also mass opposition to him from within and without the halls of power? Opponents of Putin in Russia, by the way, have said that Russiagate makes Putin look much more powerful than he actually is, which hurts their chances at defeating him (Higgins, 2017). And don't just critique, of course, but organize!

The real resistance

Because Trump is such an odious figure, many have been swept up in Russiagate. I would suggest that one of the motivations behind Russiagate is to move people out of the streets and into their homes. This is what the Watergate scandal did in the 1970s, according to leading anti-Trump organizer Becker (2017):

> Rather than leading a mass movement against Nixon and the system, the progressive sector of society was reduced to the status of spectators watching the sanctimonious, corrupted, reactionary, elite politicians of both parties rant and rave about Nixon's wrongdoings. Liberals could sit at home and cheer on as pro-imperialist and racist politicians (aka "elected officials") united to topple the hated Nixon.
>
> The radical left, those who had been in the forefront of the struggles for peace and justice, completely lost the leadership of the anti-Nixon movement.

There is a resistance out there, but it's not located in Congress, let alone in the CIA or the FBI (institutions that were set up to destroy resistance groups), and it's not led by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is known on the left as the 'graveyard of social movements.' It's where people's power goes to die.

If critical education is truly oriented toward critiquing the present and inventing a better future—which I maintain it is and must be—the our task is to utilize our educational resources and knowledges to build the real resistance, which is a resistance not to Trump the person, but to the systems that he represents: imperialism, white supremacy and anti-Blackness, sexism and misogyny, capitalism, heteronormativity, ableism, and settler-colonialism.

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