

Giroux on the War on the Young

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Review of Henry A. Giroux, *America's Education Deficit and the War on Youth*, Monthly Review Press, 2013.

Henry Giroux is a key figure in the critical pedagogy movement, editor of the *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* with his wife Susan Searls Giroux, and a prolific writer, speaker and public intellectual. His on-going column for *Truthout* – from which most of the contents of this book are pulled together with some enhancements – has proved essential reading for educators and students during the latest financial crisis. *Giroux has argued tirelessly and passionately that with the rise of market fundamentalism and the ensuing economic and financial meltdown youth are facing a crisis unlike that of any other generation.*

There is an awful lot to contemplate here but all is relevant and compelling, making this an excellent introduction to the author's general project [1] and an especially fine choice for a study group. From the opening sentence, Giroux positions his argument to a broad audience, appealing to those who would side with “democracy” against the “corporate- and state-sponsored assaults.” “As a right-wing juggernaut attempts relentlessly to destroy the social state, worker protections, unions, and civil liberties, it is easy to forget that a much less visible attack is being waged on young people, and especially on public schools and the possibility of critical forms of teaching.” (130)

For the most part these are purposeful occasional pieces that piggy-back off the latest tragedy in order to repeat a set of prepared diagrams that remain a little short on immediate prescriptions. Perhaps as a mark of respect for the Occupy movement's resistance to demands (see chapters 7 and 8), the 'programmatic' content is largely reserved for the ninth chapter. Titled 'Neoliberalism's War against Teachers in Dark Times: Rethinking the Sandy Hook Elementary School Killings,' here Giroux excels in precise cultural critique, also exemplified by Chapter 3's focus on U.S. popular culture and military-like values, where the argument that a general acceptance of violence pervades everything that children learn well into adulthood proves most compelling. While strong on the subject of *violence*, one wants to hear more substantial ruminations about the context of *fear* that has made academic repression expand under the Obama regime. [2] Giroux's target remains those social relations that promote material and symbolic violence and the message is clear that *any* education system decided by the capitalist process cannot address basic human needs or foster broad-based prosperity.

While among the better essays to read 'around' the topic, Chapter 4's analysis media representations of the tragic death of Trayvon Martin does not perhaps go far enough in honing in on the case at hand or tying its points back to the main thread of the collection. This said, it does perform a fine structural analysis of the US's national stereotypical obsession with nihilism as being endemic to black youth culture. Chapter 5 pans back out in order to explore the “suicidal state” where “the government works systematically to disenfranchise its own youth, thus attacking the very elements of a society that allow it to reproduce itself,” (24) though a more thorough analysis of the role women necessarily play in this process is absent in the short overview. [3]

The lack of more in-depth analysis and reflection on concepts reveals the limitations of the 'op. ed.' style used for the purpose of these pieces original publication. [4] Chapter 7 exposes some of the 'disappearing acts' of corporate-funded, anti-public intellectuals who erect walls around knowledge, while simultaneously rendering invisible disadvantaged populations who are deserving of compassion and social protections. But more could be said, in terms of 'ideological critique', about

how these gated intellectuals, often abetted by the dominant media, use privilege and ideological narrowness to divorce themselves from understanding the systemic elements that contribute to social and economic injustice.

Despite an annoying non-European habit of associating “authoritarianism,” “fascism” and “proto-fascism” with *anything* that thwarts democracy (this, despite his own repeated warnings to avoid such a crude binary logic), Giroux generally produces a hopeful tone that nonetheless respects Noam Chomsky's repeated warnings of creeping American *fascist* gloom. The result is a level of righteous discourse that on some occasions is pitched just short of exaggeration, able to match adversaries in the 'fire and ire' department. [5]

There are moments where his otherwise finely-honed passionate rhetoric spills over into the kind of apocalyptic anger familiar to readers of his fellow *Truthout* columnist, Chris Hedges, with whom he shares a hint of cultural reductionism with the slightly-snobbish, certainly bourgeois idea of America as “a culture of [largely civic] illiteracy” and a corresponding lack of appreciation for how consumers of popular culture and mass media are able to disagree with and subvert the message-as-massage. Still, you can't argue with the book's opening salvo: “it appears that the nation has entered a new and more ruthless historical era, marked by a growing disinvestment in the social state, public institutions, and civic morality.” (9)

Acutely aware that the failure and fraudulence of Obama-led liberalism has opened a door for the like of the loony fringe Republicans and Randoids, Giroux saves one of his scathing critiques for the libertarian-Right's “theocratic economic fundamentalist ideology” that “destroys any viable notion of civic virtue in which the social contract and common good provide the basis for creating meaningful social bonds and instilling in citizens a sense of social and civic responsibility. The idea of public service is viewed with disdain just as the work of individuals, social groups, and institutions that benefit the citizenry at large are held in contempt.” (12) The ideas of science and language, as vehicles for truth, are also viewed with disdain, leaving us with a President well-versed in double-speak who claims he wants to reduce the deficit but instead spends billions on the defence industry and wars abroad.

In conclusion, Giroux has written one of those explosive little books that might spur you to buying multiple copies in order to leave on the bus or on the coffee table in the office or teachers' lounge. His description of an as-yet uneducated America provides one of the most passionate and convincing cases to deepen and develop the anti-capitalist preconditions for a politically engaged and engaging democracy. “Pedagogy in this sense becomes central to any substantive notion of politics and must be viewed as a crucial element of organized resistance and collective struggles.” (18)

Notes

1. The reader will find the same themes treated in more detail in Giroux's other collections: *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed* (2008), *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* (2009) and *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* (2011). Giroux's choice of titles are as subtle as a sledgehammer and the repetitious content of these books serves to highlight how little has changed following the victory of Wall Street's hopes for its candidate. “[T]he same people who gave us the economic recession of 2008, lost billions in corrupt trading practices, and sold fraudulent mortgages to millions of homeowners have ironically become sources of wisdom and insight regarding how young people should be educated.” (161)

2. Giroux takes up Obama's educational failures in Henry A. Giroux (2010), *Politics After Hope: Obama and the Politics of Youth, Race, and Democracy*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

3. Giroux emphasises notions of masculinity in crisis that are produced through gruesome revelling in gun culture, constant bombardments of hyper-competitive sports, US commitments to military aggression and massive Pentagon spending, and blood filled spectacles of militarism. He is conspicuously short on advice for parents and barely scratches the surface of the fundamental role that universal child-care and young women's education will have to play in any coming democratic society.

4. One wants to know why Giroux sees some concepts, such as 'common sense' (by which he means Gramsci's "forma mentis") and 'the market' as irredeemable, while others like 'common deliberation' or 'the public sphere' are unconditionally worth saving and not subject to critical examination (e.g. we must ask *Who* can speak in this public sphere? How will it be different from the old liberal-bourgeois public sphere?). To be fair, he does elaborate on this privileging of terms in previous works but readers new to his *oeuvre* may feel disorientation by the self-assured, slightly testy manner in which he wields his overworked keywords. (It's high time we had a Giroux Glossary compiled and posted online.) We must also commend his urgent and necessary efforts to call the subaltern elements' attention to the tensions and possibilities within popular - 'mainstream' - common sense, and to the social implications and the political ramifications that these possibilities can bring. Paine and Gramsci united at last!

5. He writes with the indirect voice of experience, having spent considerable time on U.S. campus environments where he witnessed first-hand some of the situations resulting from the general culture he describes. Both Giroux and his one-time close colleague at Miami University, Oxford-Ohio, Peter McLaren, have been subject to harassment and intimidation, both on- and off-campus, from those willing to represent them as posing a threat to national security. Giroux currently holds the Global Television Network Chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, Ontario.

Dick Dunbar is an unemployed educator in the U.S. of A. This review is dedicated to his step-children, who are their own writing of radical hope.