

Book Review

Henry A. Giroux.

Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Henry A. Giroux was once what sportscasters used to call a “phenom,” an extremely talented and already successful youth with the potential to become an “all-time great.” In 1980, at the age of twenty, ice hockey player Wayne Gretsky was a “phenom.” In 1951, at the age of twenty, baseball players Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle were on the cusp of becoming “phenoms.” At the age of twenty, Henry Armand Giroux, a working class lad from an urban-industrial section of New England had won a basketball scholarship to a junior college, but he had dropped out. He worked for a couple of years at small jobs, and then won another basketball scholarship, this time to a teacher’s college. We might have been forgiven for failing to recognize him as a “phenom” at the time. He is, nonetheless, a *bona fide* phenomenon.

Henry Giroux’s education began in earnest after finally graduating with a degree in history, and moving on to do an MA at Appalachian State University. He began a career as a teacher and spent seven years at a high school near Baltimore, Maryland. He also worked as a community organizer. He got fired. Then, he moved on to a wealthy high school in Barrington, Rhode Island. He introduced some “radical” material into his classes. He got fired. A friend helped get him another scholarship in the doctoral program at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He took his degree in 1977. Since then, his academic career has been phenomenal.

Henry A. Giroux is a rock star of critical education.

Giroux’s career had started a little roughly, as such things sometimes do. Armed, however, with a Ph.D., his prospects improved. He was hired by Boston University but, despite a unanimous vote in favour of his being granted tenure, he was denied a permanent position when the president of the institution personally intervened. He then went off to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. There, he became the founding Director of the Center for Education and Cultural Studies. Next stop: a twelve-year stay and a Waterbury Chair Professorship at Pennsylvania State University. Since 2004, he has been Global Television Network Chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. So far, his biography tells the story of a working class kid who, despite some setbacks, survived, persisted and conquered the academic system. To leave it at that, however, would understate his actual accomplishments.

By my count (and I may have missed some), he has written, co-authored or edited thirty-two books and at least a half-dozen monographs in the past thirty years. He has also published (the last time I looked): 320 articles in peer-reviewed journals; 186 chapters in other people's books; and literally countless contributions to the popular press. To fill in his spare time, he is an editor or advisory board member of about twenty professional journals, an editor of the alternative news and opinion website, *Truthout* (to which he contributes an essay about every six weeks) ... I could go on. Or, I could simply call him a "rock star" of critical education.

Critical? Yes, because in his way, he is still a community organizer, though on a rather grand level. He has been called "the nemesis of neoliberalism." The title fits him nicely.

The book I have selected for discussion from a wide range of choices is *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* It is an easy chore to find issues in contemporary society that merit criticism. From the financial houses of Wall Street to the publishing empire of Rupert Murdoch, improper ethical (some would say criminal) practices have become endemic. Indifference and often conscience contempt for the Earth has marked not only chemical and petroleum corporations, but also the governments charged with the responsibility of protecting the environment and the people within it. Military adventurism, the great and growing gap between rich and poor (both domestically and globally), and a general sense of cultural malaise in those parts of the world wealthy enough to afford such *angst* are all wide-open targets for anyone with the wit and the will to notice. Henry A. Giroux has noticed, and a fair share of his work has helped to expose, analyse and trenchantly criticize the malfeasance and the miscreants in these matters and many more.

Still, the theme that appears most often and most fully in his writings, his speeches and his teaching career is education and, increasingly, the education of the relatively young. He draws attention to school children more than college and university students who, we might wish, are better able to look after themselves. Giroux has spent much of his career advancing some of the progressive pedagogical practices once championed by one of his early mentors, Paolo Friere. He is now inclined to look into the experience of young people who have become disposable in a failing postmodern society that has never provided the prosperity and security once promised by such promoters of postindustrialism as Daniel Bell and advocates of revolutionary business practices as corporate guru Peter Drucker. Under their sway, some may recall, the main problem of the twenty-first century was supposed to be: "What should we do with the abundant leisure time promised by automation and the information society?"

As it has happened, the real problem is how to negotiate the shrinking social welfare system, the eviscerated public education system and the long and growing unemployment lines where the best that may befall a high school drop-out or a college graduate is a temporary or part-time job at a fraction over the minimum wage. Henry Giroux not only offers a devastating critique of how our society has not only abandoned larger and larger numbers of our youth, but has actually turned on them as potential enemies of the state. Recent riots in the United Kingdom, incidentally, will doubtless add clout to the arguments of those obsessed with the desire to employ more law enforcement officers and build more prisons.

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Giroux begins his book with a premise that I have long resisted. Coming from the “Sourpuss School of There’s Nothing New Under the Sun,” I try to find parallels between the ways in which schooling is failing today, and the ways in which it has failed in the past. When I was a pupil, nib pens and inkwells were the only writing instruments and resources permitted. In ordinary pedagogical practices, children sat rigidly in rows, remained silent unless called upon and were expected to engage in rote learning. Physical abuse was not uncommon. Today, the parallels involve the appearance that children rarely write, wander aimlessly in class, chat interminably (when not tweeting and texting) and seem disengaged from learning of any sort. Superficially, there is a great deal of difference between what was irretrievably then and what is undeniably now. Yet, I have been inclined to think that the underlying purpose is the same: to reproduce a class system in which only the best and the brightest (or the wealthiest and the nicest) will be processed into high-performance streams on their way to lucrative careers as professionals; the rest will be weeded out. Upon reflection, perhaps the biggest difference was that the fate of the drop-out was not sealed. In the 1950s, it was still possible to earn a decent living in the abundant manufacturing jobs. In fact, a very few ambitious and talented (necessarily) boys could start out as a clerk and rise to be a leader of a bank, a commercial enterprise or a manufacturing giant. Today? Not so much.

I have been encouraged in my opinions by opening-of-semester talks and professional-development exercises in which teachers are regularly told by superannuated pep-talkers and post-adolescent accountants about how “special” and “different” the current crop of students (often called the “Millennials,” though that label is getting a tad long in the tooth). The hollowness of the managerial rhetoric is evident to all. The young people we encounter as teachers are said to be self-directed, demanding and impatient with assignments that require that attention be paid to the written word or that thought be focused at all. They are, however, said to be media literate, computer savvy and occasionally somewhat spoiled by an unwarranted sense of “entitlement.” In response to our new “challenges,” we are encouraged to be lively, entertaining, buoyant and tolerant of beliefs and behaviour that might otherwise be discomfiting. We are sometimes encouraged to use the social media, but cautioned against saying anything untoward on our Facebook walls or our “tweets.” Above all, the phrases that echo unpleasantly in my ear are these: we are told to “have fun” and thereby to give our students a “fun experience,” as though amiability was an adequate substitute for excellence and that it was somehow transferable through a convincing display of glee.

Neither the terms used to describe the current student body, nor the admonition to treat education as entertainment seem to fit the nature and the needs of the vast majority of the 15,000 or so students whom I have been privileged to teach since 1967—the year Henry Giroux and I first became Teaching Assistants in our first year of graduate school. So, when he says that “today’s youth are facing a crisis unlike any previous generation,” I automatically recoil. Yet, he catches me up. I am quite used to the several and often

interdependent critiques of education under late capitalism. What *Youth in a Suspect Society* eventually persuades me to believe, however, is not just that the young and the marginalized are treated unfairly or taught to conform to a repressive consumerist culture; these I take to be “givens,” against which a critical educator must always struggle. Instead, Giroux presents an analysis which compellingly shows that today’s students are “caught between the discourses of consumerism and a powerful crime-control complex.”

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Young people are therefore fortunate to be “viewed as commodities and offered a corporatized education,” for the alternative is to be brutalized by a “disciplinary apparatus and expanding criminal justice system.” This is a view that I can easily recognize in the desolate urban ghettos of the United States, but it is not one that I could immediately apply to seemingly comfortable suburbia, nor much to Canada—with some obvious exceptions, not least the conditions in which a significant proportion of Native Canadians are compelled to grow up. When, however, I put Giroux’s writing together with the social policy proposals—especially the current federal government’s commitment to maintain and to toughen the absurd laws concerning recreational drugs and to invest billions in prisons during a time of systemic crime reduction—it becomes clear that Professor Giroux has not imported a certain American paranoia, but has presciently seen how the once more peaceable Canadian society is being made over in the image of what is least commendable in the United States.

On the other hand, Henry Giroux has managed to maintain the kind of optimism that is most commendable aspects of American culture. *Youth in a Suspect Society*, he writes, “is motivated by a sense of outrage and a sense of hope.” This is important, for as Canada’s beloved conservative philosopher George Grant (also for a significant time, a denizen of McMaster University) eloquently put it in an address to students in October, 1965: “Moral fervour is too valuable to be wasted on anything but reality.” He was talking to a large group of (mainly) students—me among them—who were (mainly) associated with what was called the “new left.” Giroux might also have felt at home in such company. Whether or not he would have been charmed by George Grant, his work has displayed a profound engagement with reality throughout. He captures the overarching culture of consumerism well. He traces the contours of the punitive state, the social schisms of race, class and gender, the attack on education and the public sector, and underlying all the neoliberal ideology of the unfettered marketplace—unfettered, that is, by any public institution or interest that would restrain corporate hegemony and direct the energy of the private sector to the furtherance of the public good.

Giroux will, however, lose some readers when he argues unblinkingly that “the combined threat of these forces is so extreme it can be accurately be described as a ‘war on youth’.” At this rhetorical point, the identification of the “extreme forces” will be reflected back upon him. The language of “war” will unsettle committed social reformers, public-spirited citizens and sincere public servants and, having nowhere to park their happy faces, they

will come to think that it is Giroux who is the extremist. We are not used to having our comfortable liberalism unmasked. We feel discomforted when cautious pessimists like Chris Hedges tell us that things are bad, getting worse and won't get better for a long time, if ever, no matter how positive our attitudes and how desperate our commitment to have fun. We feel no better when we are informed that our kindness, good humour and relentless compassion are glosses on an inherently unjust system.

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But, as has been said, Henry A. Giroux tempers his outrage with optimism. Part of it comes from having figured things out better than I did. The terrors of casino capitalism wasn't hard to comprehend, but I'd underestimated the punishing state. The "youth-crime-governing complex," he says, subjects young people to "harsh discipline, while criminalizing more and more aspects of their behaviour." We, in Canada, got a taste of it during the suppression of mild dissent during the G-20 meetings in Toronto in June, 2010. There are plenty of other hints about what is to come. What's more, the prime target will be those who are now under twenty or even ten, for it takes a while to organize and legitimize broad-scale repression.

Giroux has one more thing to tell us. He distinguishes between the "soft" and the "hard" war on youth. The soft war combines failure to develop public policies that will provide genuine opportunities for both personal fulfillment and public responsibility. Young people are treated as commodities, human resources, clients of the state, consumers and a reserve army of unemployed in the neoliberal political economy. Youth, of course, are complicit in this commodification of their lives, their experiences and their very bodies as they lose their potential identities in the social networks and allow themselves to be commercialized in every possible way as producers, consumers and alienated political non-actors. The hard war, on the other hand, is not just a matter of substituting virtuality for reality. It is a harsh form of reality including the organization of schools on a prison model with increased surveillance, police patrols and disciplinary control—the predictable consequence of which is an American-style system of repetitive incarceration, given its most disreputable form in the infamous policy of "three-strikes-and-your-out" (or, rather, three convictions and you will be in jail for life).

Public servants and all those involved in public policy from education to health care to juvenile crime to labour and economic development need to come to terms with Henry A. Giroux. There are many who espouse and enable precisely the social policies that he condemns; they would do themselves no harm to reconsider their "values." There are many more who will feel sympathy for the plight of the young, but will believe his arguments to be exaggerated. They would do themselves no injury to conduct a thorough reality check. There are some who will be persuaded by the case that he makes. They would do no one any good to throw up their hands in despair and assume that nothing can be done.

Giroux's challenge is to those who recognize the structural problems in our society and the damage they are doing to young people and the polity. If innovation is to mean anything more than prescribing a new and improved palliative upon a dying democracy, Giroux is just the man to make a new diagnosis and prescribe a new therapy. Innovation must be about substantive change or it merely entrenches what already exists. For scholars and activists like Henry Giroux, the first and most necessary part of a plan for good health is to be relentless and thorough in acknowledging the origins, extent and the severity of the disease. When that is done honestly, the sources of the problems will become clear, and the therapeutic regimen needed for recovery will become plain as well.

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