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**Democracy Lost, Democracy Regained:
Reclaiming the Spirit of a Nation and the Value of its Youth**

by
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A Review of *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* by Henry A. Giroux (Palgrave/ Macmillan, New York: 2003), 234 pages.

After finishing Henry Giroux's engaging new book, I could not help but imagine the following conversation taking place between an official from the Department of Homeland Security and an official of equal rank from the Department of Education.

Homeland Security Official: "So, you say this Giroux character is for real . . . I mean, he's a bonafide educator, and not some anti-globalist, Green Party plant running for some office? You know the Green Party candidate for the last gubernatorial election in New York was some kind of wacko professor, I think his name is Aronowitz, but come on, that's New York!"

Education Official: "Actually, Giroux is a professor of education at Penn State, holds an endowed chair, and Stanley Aronowitz is his friend and collaborator."

HSO: "What! What does that mean? Whose giving him support . . . there are laws now. He can't just say things and collaborate with whomever he wants. What the hell does he think, that we're **not** going to do something?"

EO: "Well for the past twenty years or so, Giroux has been one giant pain. He and his network of critical pedagogues"

HSO: "Network! A network of *what?*"

EO: "They call themselves critical pedagogues and they have infiltrated our education system from pre-K right through graduate programs across the United States. And Giroux, Giroux is the biggest threat of all. He's been on some kind of holy mission: he has authored, co-authored, edited and co-edited over thirty influential books, and shows no signs of slowing down."

HSO: "What the hell is going on here? Can't you guys stop him? Can't you pressure his institution with something, like cutting federal funded education programs or challenging their accreditation? I mean come on; he's a threat to national security. He's undermining homeland security with his subversive tirades against capitalism, globalism, and our educational policies. The man is inciting educators, parents, students--and anybody else who will listen--to criticize and challenge our whole way of doing things. He's a threat and must be dealt with accordingly. What the hell have you guys been doing at the Department of Education? You've got some good people over there, all of them trying to restore order to our education system. How the hell could you let this happen?"

EO: "We've tried; trust me we've tried. We've matched Giroux's calls for social justice in and out of the classroom with ever greater governmental pressures on school districts and teachers to conform to our policies and practices, dating back to Reagan--remember William Bennett, give us a little credit. And now at President Bush's urging, we have imposed and reinforced neoliberal imperatives on school systems everywhere. We have demanded that the economic realities of a post-9/11 market dictate what and how we teach. And look how successful we have been: now, more than ever before there's a strong charter school movement,

with support from minorities; there's a real demand for choice; ever greater federal funding for faith-based schools; and, perhaps most importantly, the adoption of corporate values: efficiency, accountability and productivity. Today, many Americans are convinced that it has been progressive educators, like Giroux, who have destroyed all standards and the quality of public education. We've got people thinking Giroux and his type are the reason for the failure of this generation of learners. We have been rather successful in forwarding the belief that the untraditional curricula and values promoted by Giroux and his ilk are the real threat to education, a threat to our economy, and a threat to this and future generations."

HSO: "Yeah, so why is Giroux still breathing fire, and making my boss's blood pressure rise . . . if what you say is true?"

EO: "It is true, all of it. But Giroux won't back down. And he's got loyal friends, colleagues and readers. I agree with you, Giroux is out of control, but . . ."

HSO: "But nothing! That's why we're stepping in. It's time to shut him up; homeland security is at risk. As I see it, Giroux is a threat because his claims, assessments and demands are leading us to conflict; what he's doing must be in violation of some new restriction. God, does Giroux think he can set the clock back? Democracy . . . doesn't Giroux realize that democracy **is** the market, that citizens **are** consumers, and that their rights to have access to what they want is what's important, and is what we're fighting for? Doesn't he know that this is what makes the United States great and worth defending against **all** who would have it otherwise? Damn it, even kids know this; it's axiomatic: the United States equals access to all that is available on the market. Doesn't he get it: children are not ignored or abandoned, they are our best consumers, and everybody is paying attention to them . . . I think I am going to call some folks at the Treasury Department. Giroux is a danger to the whole economy. I never realized how bad things are; you guys have really let this go on for far too long."

EO: "Perhaps, but on the bright side, if **we** collaborate and do this the right way, we might be able to fulfill Reagan's original mission and dismantle public education all together. After all, homeland security does start at home. I'll call Whittle and his colleagues at Edison Schools to see if his company can get ready to run with this. President Bush may make good on his campaign promise yet to be the education president. Who would have thought that 9/11 would become the engine for propelling the greatest reform effort in public education? Finally, an education system that adheres to market principles and a conservative agenda; this is something special. Giroux can be the fall guy. We can make him out to be unpatriotic and holding up the president's educational reforms and initiatives. And if it works . . . think of what else is possible . . ."

HO: "Now you're making sense."

Perhaps such a conversation seems a bit far fetched, especially to those still convinced that the Bush administration is genuinely committed to helping the youth of our nation with its "no child left behind" program," (never mind the horrible thought that the Department of Homeland Security might actually consider Henry A. Giroux or any dissident citizen a legitimate target). I, however, unfortunately find such a conversation not only plausible but ultimately inevitable for two simple reasons. First, since 9/11 the current administration has displayed unrestrained opportunism in stifling, if not eradicating, all oppositional voices. Second, Bush has made clear his desire to revisit and fulfill Reagan's goal of reducing government by default (read: implementing tax cuts that in turn force "necessary cost-cutting measures" for such things as health care, housing and education) while simultaneously providing aide to corporations and "incentives" to investors. Like Reagan, Bush is apparently willing to empty the government's coffers in order to expand government services to the wealthiest of citizens: this is government as elite banker--providing free services for its "premiere" clients while charging exorbitant fees to average customers who unfairly subsidize the entire operation.

Because of this, Giroux's new book, ***The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear***, is essential reading for anyone trying to

make sense of this administration's rhetoric and policies (including what is going on at the Department of Homeland Security). As usual, Giroux is writing for a general audience, but, as is also typical, he is particularly helpful and challenging to those directly involved with education. ***The Abandoned Generation*** is nothing less than a bold, forthright and urgent appeal to document and counter the attack on our nation's youth and its devastating impact on our democracy as a whole. Giroux has once again demonstrated why he is such an important and critical voice.

The simple fact is: Giroux **is** a threat, as are all dissident voices rejecting the Bush/Cheney agenda. Giroux is especially problematic for this administration because he goes to great lengths to (and succeeds in) demonstrating how Bush is attacking the youth of America while claiming to transform education in the name of children.

According to Giroux,

the United States is at war with young people. All youth are targets, especially those marginalized by class and color. This is a war waged by liberals, conservatives, corporate interests, and religious fundamentalists against those public spaces, goods, and laws that view children and youth as an important social investment, and includes a full-scale attack on children's rights, social services, the welfare state, and the public schools. Youth have become the all important group onto which class and racial anxieties are projected. Their very presence represents both the broken promises of capitalism in the age of deregulation and downsizing and a collective fear of the consequences wrought by systemic class inequalities, racism, and a culture of "infectious greed" that has created a generation of unskilled and displaced youth expelled from shrinking markets, blue collar jobs, and any viable hope in the future. (xvi)

Giroux goes on to argue that the

war against youth can, in part, be understood as part of the fundamental values and practices of a rapacious, neoliberal capitalism; moreover, the consequences of this complex cultural and economic assault can no longer be ignored by educators, parents, and other concerned citizens. (xvi)

By connecting "educators, parents and other concerned citizens" in the struggle against the war, Giroux argues for a notion of leadership that first acknowledges the sorry state

of our nation and then goes on to demand a commitment to reclaiming the very democracy being systematically stolen from its diverse and hardworking population (citizens, resident aliens and illegal immigrants alike).

What makes Giroux's critique all the more powerful is his own unrelenting commitment to the promise of democracy via public education, and his call-to-arms requiring educators

to create a broad-based movement for the defense of public goods and democratic public spheres, one that links the struggle for autonomy within the public schools to universities, workplaces, and other social settings.

(97)

In short, Giroux is calling for a radical engagement with the forces undermining democracy. In the process, among other important claims, Giroux argues for a leadership that emerges out of opposition, that is, an educational leadership that courageously rejects the lies and misinformation forwarded by the Bush administration. Giroux also wants a leadership that extends and enhances the reach of democracy.

For Giroux,

Bush's educational policy represents an attempt on the part of right-wing conservatives, corporate interests, and the religious right to privatize social services formerly provided by the state, to consolidate wealth among affluent groups, and to construct a market-based value system which enshrines individualism, self-help, bureaucratic management, and consumerism at the expense of those values that reflect the primacy of the ethical, social, and civic in public life. (81)

Of course, the right, for more than twenty years, has in fact distorted the relationship between individual agency and government support of social programs. Giroux persuasively and rightly confronts Bush and company for manipulating educational reform in order to merely promote corporate values and interests.

As Giroux puts it,

[c]ouched in the language of educational reform, corporate values and test-driven competition become the sources of individual initiative and cancel out these collective values and experiences that provide the foundation for democratic civic life. This privatizing morality is reinforced

as corporate culture becomes increasingly the only legitimate model of educational leadership and moral authority. (81)

Such a model, Giroux argues,

with its inability to make a distinction between market relations and a market society, lacks the vocabulary for addressing broader conceptions of democratic citizenship and encourages schools to sell their curriculum, students, and space to the highest corporate bidder. Many of the proposals in Bush's reform bill are, in fact, designed to both liquidate the gains of the welfare state, disempower working-class children, and actively pursue the ongoing quest to privatize health, education, and other public goods-- extending an agenda that has dominated American political life since the beginning of the Reagan era in 1980. (81)

In short, ***The Abandoned Generation*** is a masterful critique of the leadership of our nation: political, economic, and educational. The impact of the failed leadership is, according to Giroux, undermining democracy, compromising education at all levels, and leaving an entire generation to suffer the consequences of Bush's short-sightedness, greed, and moral arrogance. Educational reform under Bush amounts to little more than transposing corporate values and interests onto the lives of students and teachers, who must now struggle, that is, compete, with market forces in order to survive.¹

As Giroux summarizes it,

Bush's educational reforms end up celebrating the bureaucratic rules of management, regulation, and control at the expense of substantive democracy, critical citizenship, and basic human rights. (89)

Leadership of all types but especially educational leadership under Bush gets understood as "business." As such, Bush's educational reform "ignores and distorts the real and vital differences between 'doing business' and the 'business,' as it were, of educating a critically minded citizenry."² Giroux contends that to confuse corporate values with democratic principles in public education is to pervert the very purpose of teaching and learning. Teachers become test givers, competing with their colleagues

in order to receive requisite rewards, while at the same time students are encouraged to separate themselves from others, often through the discriminatory terms of race, class and gender. (89)

Competition becomes the paradigm for all modes of life and notions of engaged democratic community get eroded, if not outright destroyed.

For those struggling with the real and intense pressures that the Bush administration has imposed on daily school life, aspiring to genuine educational leadership means, as Giroux notes, “reaffirming the importance of the classroom as a site of critique, critical exchange, and social transformation” (98). In the age of Bush, educational leadership is, necessarily, oppositional due to the war on democracy and youth. For Giroux,

[e]ducation is a moral and political practice, and always presupposes an introduction to and preparation for particular forms of social life, a particular rendering of what community is, and an idea of what the future might hold. (173)

Educational leadership must therefore see itself within the context of this moral and political practice. It must see itself as more than simply working within the confines of the market, working, that is, beyond the corporate mandates of profitability alone. The value of public education, in part, lies in its responsibility to provide its youth with the hope and possibility of critical and genuine democratic engagement. The job, the obligation, of educational leadership, then, is to provide the ethical direction and courage that ensure such hope and possibility.

In *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*, Henry A. Giroux, reminds us of this responsibility. He powerfully provides us with the reasons why this responsibility needs to be acknowledged and embraced. And, perhaps most importantly, he passionately encourages us to accept this responsibility as a necessary step toward safeguarding public education, a step that requires us to assert our commitment and resolve to reclaim our democracy and the value of its youth.

¹ See Kenneth J. Saltman, *Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools--A Threat To Democracy* (Roman and Littlefield, 2000).

² I am taking this phrase from my forthcoming, *Managing to be Different: Educational Leadership as Critical Practice*.

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