

Book Review

Henry A. Giroux
Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education
Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

I was a little disappointed by Henry A. Giroux's most recent book, and I heartily recommend it.

Let me explain.

Henry A. Giroux is a working-class kid from the United States of America. He got into college on a basketball scholarship. He is probably the most prolific author among those educators that align themselves with what's called "critical pedagogy." He could justifiably claim the mantle of Paulo Freire. He holds the Global TV Network Chair Professorship in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario and is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor at Ryerson University in Toronto. His *curriculum vitae* could pass for a small town's telephone book. He is 70-years-old. He looks more than half but not quite three-quarters of his age. He looks like he'd still make a formidable point guard. He still has the spirit of a working-class kid from the United States of America.

Giroux has plenty of detractors. He has the air of a self-promoter. He can be admired for his stage presence in any of the many performances he gives as a certified "public intellectual," but his critics might label his performances no more than a few hyperbolic shorts of demagoguery. He can also be very, very funny.

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Most obviously, Henry A. Giroux can be dismissed as an "ideologue." I know a number of educational administrators who would do and have done everything they could to squelch an invitation for him to speak on campus. They are afraid of him. Worse, I know an enormous number of educational administrators who have never even heard of him—a testament only to the vast gap between them and anything important going on in education and the academic world.

I have been privileged to share some air with him at a number of public lectures and I have had the opportunity to speak with him briefly on occasion. He would not, I think, publicly or privately reject the labels that others attempt to stick on him. It's not

worth the trouble. He is, by choice, a very busy man. He will talk to any audience worth his time—at professional conferences, faculty meetings, trade union gatherings or any others with a spark of life and a sense of outrage. When he does talk, they will leave well served and all the better for the experience. He *is* political and he is political for the very reason that he can't help it. None of us can.

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From Henry Giroux's perspective, education from pre-school to post-graduate studies is under attack. It is being eviscerated by the same forces that dominate the toxic wasteland of popular entertainment, the "school-to-prison pipeline" that siphons off discontent in the racialized urban American centres, that conduct perpetual foreign wars and that ruthlessly exploit people regardless of age, gender and colour.

It is one of Henry Giroux's mantras that education is not the objective pursuit and dissemination of value-free knowledge and it is certainly not or (rather ought not to be) an anaesthetizing and depoliticizing process in which marketable "skill sets" are dispensed to uncritical student "customers" who are desperate to find employment in postmodern economies where satisfying, secure and well-paying jobs are quickly disappearing where they have not already vanished.

In the alternative, Giroux believes that the educational project is many things, but it is at least this: regardless of whether students are studying architecture or zoology, engineering, economics, ethics or English literature, there is always a moral and a political essence to the enterprise. His intent, of course, is not quite that of liberal reformers such as nineteenth-century Upper Canadian Methodist school promoter Egerton Ryerson, who proclaimed: "The object of education, rightly understood is, first to make good men...secondly to fit them for usefulness" (Doucet, 2002). Ryerson, after all, was a "a saddle bag preacher and itinerant minister," a co-founder and intermitted editor of *The Christian Guardian* who, upon being named Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada in 1844 by Governor-General Sir Charles Metcalfe, undertook a thirty-year project to establish a comprehensive system of elementary and secondary schools which revolutionized education in the territory (Crittenden, 1975). His efforts represented an open-minded and democratic approach, to the consternation of leaders of the more aristocratic Anglican Church; but, his goal was nonetheless to promote moral education as indoctrination into conventional social values.

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What's more, for Giroux, the educational project is both moral and political: it is moral insofar as it equips students with the capacity to distinguish good from evil though the "good" is never understood or expressed as some transcendental Platonic archetype or dogma, and it is political in that it should assist students in determining how the good may be enhanced and evil diminished by turning private concerns into public policy debates through practical action. Giroux thinks that education should be life-long and that education should have practical consequences—not just job training and not at all publicly subsidized corporate indoctrination. Henry A. Giroux wants to see more and more working people with the skills and the desires to improve their own lives and to improve society by making genuine changes in our social relations and the relations of production and distribution of material and intellectual products and services.

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I said at the beginning that I was disappointed in this book, and I am. When the publishers first announced the project almost a year ago, the title was said to be *Higher Education after Neoliberalism*. I was immediately made optimistic not only about the book, but also about society. I was thrilled to imagine that Henry believed that neoliberalism as thought and practice was coming to an end and that it would not take us all down with it. Giroux seemed to be hinting that there would still be something left of higher education once the corporatists had withdrawn. The notion that there would be a world left to enjoy after the thirty-or-more-years triumph of neoliberal ideology and political economy was heartening.

Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education, however, rehearses the diagnosis, but does not do enough to explain the therapy. I have read a number of Henry Giroux's almost sixty books, many of his scholarly articles and just about every one of his bimonthly essays on the alternative news and opinion website *Truthout.org*. For people like me, the new book tells us largely what we already knew because, in large measure, Henry Giroux had either told us or told us something very like it before. Perhaps I expected too much in the way of a detailed path to a redeemable future or just a stronger reaffirmation that there would actually be a future in which something like an equitable and environmentally sustainable society could be built—even if only on the real or metaphorical ashes of the old.

But, and this is an enormous *but* ... for those who are not already familiar with him, the new volume is an excellent introduction to his relentless critique of our current social arrangements *and* has a relentless enthusiasm and optimism about what lies ahead. As well, when (not if) you like it, it will encourage you to probe Giroux's other works—his exploration of prisons and the war on youth, his accounts of the political struggle for control of public space and the restoration of the "commons" and, for the especially gutsy and spirited, an exploration of the world of Walt Disney (and I am not joking). In my view, in short, Henry A. Giroux is an international treasure and nothing less.

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References

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