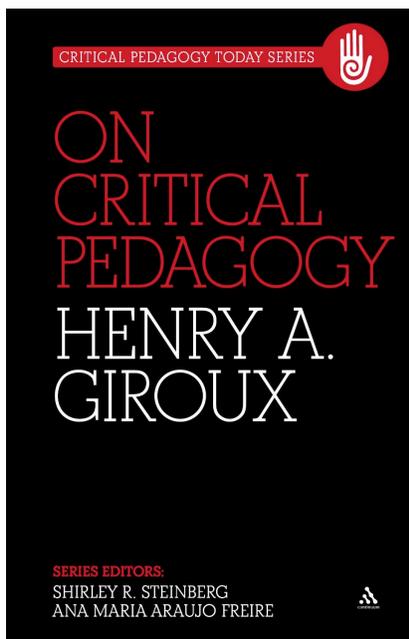


## Book Review

### ‘On Critical Pedagogy’

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*On Critical Pedagogy*. Henry A. Giroux. New York: Continuum, 2011. 186 pp.

Henry A. Giroux is currently the Global TV Network Chair Professorship at McMaster University in the English and Cultural Studies department. He is one of the foremost scholars on critical pedagogy. While his work varies, his main target is the economic and social system of neo-liberalism and its effect on both secondary and post-secondary education. His 2011 work *On Critical Pedagogy* is a collection of related essays that each tackles some part of neo-liberalism’s impact on education. While the essays vary, Giroux states in the introduction that the common thread among all the essays is the belief that education is fundamental to democracy because no democratic society can survive without critical, self-reflexive citizens who act socially responsible and are willing to make moral

judgments (4). Neo-liberalism is a system which stamps out this critical dimension in students because neo-liberals argue that the free market can solve all social issues while profit accumulation is held up as the highest goal. Giroux offers an analysis of how neo-liberalism has infiltrated education and illustrates how it is detrimental to democracy and what educators can do to stop it.

The first theme that Giroux examines is the current state of secondary and higher education and its potential for the future. This is a crucial insight. Giroux maintains that many critical theorists simply diagnose the problem of neo-liberalism but they do not treat it. His intended cure is democracy. For Giroux, education is a site of democracy, activism and social change (7). Schools are supposed to introduce students to a diversity of intellectual ideas. Overall, Giroux urges educators to develop a language of hope to combat neo-liberalism and the continual fight against democracy. Students do not just learn about democracy, rather they participate in it by speaking and learning this language and then using it. The most important point that Giroux stresses is the fact that democracy is not finished, it is an ongoing project and education is integral to this project. This language of hope and the students' participation in the unfinished project democracy is what Giroux calls Critical Pedagogy. As Giroux asserts in the introduction, a democracy cannot survive without critical and engaged citizens, and he believes that education is the site for this critical training and critical pedagogy (12).

Giroux maintains that education cannot be democratic if it is made to follow the dictates of neo-liberalism. To challenge neo-liberalism is extremely difficult albeit not impossible. He notes that the neo-liberal visions of education make human beings superfluous as political and civic actors, abolish democratic spheres, and are antithetical to public notions. In blunt language, Giroux describes how neo-liberalism works against democracy, which is something that education in the United States has traditionally worked to foster. Giroux calls education to

action, to rouse from its complacency and fight (17). This may be the most pertinent point in the entire work. It is time to fight. In order to do this, education must show how neo-liberalism is not an established fact but rather a theory that is promoted by many with vested interests.

Giroux argues that neo-liberalism has cast itself as universal and beyond criticism (25-28). Neo-liberalism just is. Giroux explains that this has been accomplished by neoliberal scholars situating neo-liberalism within the context of science and positivism that emerged in the later twentieth century. The main tenets of neo-liberalism, such as profit accumulation, cost benefit analysis and the quantification of all social phenomena especially education, are taken as quasi-scientific facts by the general public and almost all policymakers. This has led to neo-liberalism becoming entrenched and immutable in the minds of virtually everyone (29). Here Giroux maintains that a true understanding of the historical formation of neo-liberalism is dangerous to the neoliberal order. A true critical and historical understanding of neo-liberalism would dethrone it from its position of immutability and cast it as an ideology (30). This is why advocates of neo-liberalism and the current order work hard to maintain the supposed ahistorical and immutable nature of neo-liberalism. This in itself is an important observation. There are many forces at work, which sustain the neo-liberal order. All of these forces must be ruthlessly questioned.

One of the great merits of this work is its treatment of children and young adults. Children are the ones directly affected by neoliberal practices in education. They are the ones deprived of a true emancipatory education (81). They are far from neglected however. Rather, as Giroux points out, children have become the fodder of the advertising industry as well as the military industrial complex. He poignantly argued that children are now disposable (92). This point cannot be overstated and it calls attention to some of the more distressing problems of neo-liberalism. In neo-liberalism, children are no longer seen as potential citizens, but rather,

consumers. Corporations market all sorts of products to children and young adults even and especially unhealthy or harmful products such as energy drinks and violent video games. Moreover, education itself becomes a product in the form of standardized tests and for-profit colleges both of which are of dubious pedagogical value. In a biting criticism, Giroux titled one of the essays “No bailouts for youth.” He points out that while the US government spent almost a trillion dollars bailing out crooked financial institutions that facilitated the current economic crisis, educational funding has been drastically reduced (105). This may be one of the ultimate and saddest paradoxes of our age, and it touches on the much more fundamental notion of the social contract.

In one of the most drastic arguments of the book, Giroux boldly maintains that the transformation of students into consumers is a violation of the social contract. Children and education are the embodiment of the social contract (107). The present generation realizes that it has a debt to posterity and children and education is vital to this honoring this commitment. Yet under the auspices of neo-liberalism, the debt to posterity is reneged on. This debt is not profitable and it is a drag on the current economic situation. Furthermore, true pedagogy in the form of critical thinking and civic participation cannot be quantified or measured whereas standardized tests can. Giroux maintains that neo-liberalism exists in a sort of perpetual present. In this vortex of measurement and profit, entities try to sell products, accumulate profit and compete with competitors. No regard is given for the havoc this is causing or how children are affected (110). There is no real consideration of the future, only a perpetual present where entities seek to accumulate profit at the expense of everyone else.

Giroux’s work also speaks to larger social phenomena: that of hyper-consumption. The first generation of Critical Theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, spoke of similar notions. They argued how society had become one giant department

store where everything is now for sale. It seems that no one listened to Adorno, Horkheimer or Marcuse because we are saying the same things fifty years later. The situation has deteriorated. Giroux maintains that since the Bush years the social and communal bonds of American society have been eroded in favor of a pathological consumption and militant individualism (110). What Giroux's analysis makes blatantly clear is how consumption is now a new type of morality (123). We are what we consume and there are more choices than ever. The word choice has become synonymous with civic duty. We are Americans because we have freedom and our freedom is to choose whatever we want (124). Yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer remarked over 60 years ago, this is only a pseudo. Giroux's work serves to reinforce this point. True freedom can only exist in a vibrant public and democratic sphere, not in a pathological consumption of material goods. Education must be the lynchpin of this participatory sphere.

Giroux's criticism goes beyond left and right politics. He holds both sides responsible for the neo-liberal dominance of education. He laments that there are too few radicals left (45). In their stead, he argues that formerly progressive leftists have separated culture from education and are critical of the democratic potential of education. Leftist scholars have now acquiesced to the neo-liberal calls for human capital and education as job training (49). Pedagogy, if uncritical or un-reflexive will become part of the oppressive neo-liberal framework He calls for radical scholars to emerge and challenge neo-liberalism's hold on education.

Giroux bluntly points out that conservatives recognize the power of truly progressive education and seek to stamp it out (54). He goes on to assert that public education is a democratic institution and neo-liberals are trying to dismantle it and remake it in the image of the market. His main polemic is aimed at two right wing scholars Harold Entwistle and E.D. Hirsch, who appropriated the work of the leftist and revolutionary Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci for conservative causes (61). Gramsci illustrated how culture and politics are entwined

and the power of a truly progressive education in exposing this. Entwistle and Hirsh used Gramsci's insights to show that culture and education are entwined and subsequently using this fact to expunge democratic activism in schools because it was dangerous and not conducive to true learning. Rather, for Entwistle and Hirsch, education should simply imprint students with skills (62).

Giroux further delves into the thoughts of Antonio Gramsci and the intellectual giant of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire. Giroux points out how Gramsci maintained that culture and politics could not be separated. For Gramsci, politics bore down on pedagogical practices. What transpires in the cultural and political sphere has a direct and usually harmful effect on education. Giroux uses Gramsci to call attention to the fact that if culture and pedagogy are seen as separate entities, as they are today by many scholars on both the left and the right, pedagogy, instead of furthering democracy, will only further oppression.

Paulo Freire is arguably the most influential critical theorist of education. Giroux sheds an intimate and personal look on Freire's life and his contribution to critical education. Giroux had the opportunity to meet and befriend Freire and so Giroux devotes a substantial amount of space to discussing the ideas of Freire. Freire challenged the elites not only in his own country but the world over (90). He disdained "banking" education, where students are simply seen as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge of the elite and status quo. Rather, Freire saw students as vibrant and dynamic citizens who must constantly challenge the status quo and all forms of oppression (94). Giroux's work falls in line with Freire's ideas. Giroux has taken up Freire's mantle and continued the fight against neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism is ubiquitous. It permeates everything. Giroux examines this perpetual "neo-liberal creep" in an essay on public pedagogy. Giroux describes public pedagogy as a method of education, which falls outside of the formal education system. The general public is

“educated” to neo-liberalism by way of the media, advertising, government propaganda and the Internet to name a few sources. All of these methods reinforce the commonsense-ness and seemingly immutability of neo-liberalism by glorifying the market and by promoting an almost pathological consumerism. The general public is educated about neo-liberalism by way of culture. This harkens back to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s notion of the “Culture Industry.” The culture industry was a giant conglomerate consisting of the media, advertisers and corporations, which used cultural symbols to reinforce the dogmas of capitalism. Giroux’s public pedagogy is a variation of this, but he also expands on it because with the advent of the Internet, public pedagogy is literally everywhere (97). We as a society are educated in a variety ways of how neo-liberalism is beneficial. We are told that schools must be “held accountable,” they must produce workers for the global economy. We are bombarded with advertisements trying to sell us gadgets and products that will make us complete. New agencies give us the new we want to hear. There is seemingly no escape from our “education.” Giroux demonstrates how schools must be this refuge. Schools cannot become mouth pieces for neo-liberalism; rather they must be a safe haven from it (99).

Since neo-liberalism has penetrated deeply into the fabric of society, a complex approach of resistance is needed. Giroux argues that problems have been individualized. For instance, neo-liberals argue that poverty is the fault of the individual when in reality poverty is an effect of unequal capitalist distribution of resources. Instead of looking at the complex factors that contribute to poverty in the capitalist system, blaming the individual is an easy solution (100). Giroux calls for a multi-disciplinary approach to tackle the complex problems that neo-liberalism breeds. This approach always begins with education and critical pedagogy (67). Giroux points out that the dialectical relationship between economic production and social and cultural contexts (23). Once students become critical and self-reflexive, they can begin to

understand this interconnected relationship between economics, politics and culture. They can use this understanding to further enhance the unfinished project of democracy and make it better suited to the changing conditions of society (54).

The last chapter is aptly titled “Does Critical Pedagogy Have a Future?” This is actually an interview with Manuela Guilherme. In the interview, Giroux discusses some of the future challenges of critical pedagogy. He leaves the reader with a stark but hopeful recommendation. He argues that in these dark times educators must fight to connect education with democracy (171). This is the guiding thread through the whole book. Democracy cannot survive without critical education and critical citizens to sustain it.