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**Let Us Make Haste While We Can:
A Conversation with Henry Giroux (Part 1)
The Substance of Truth
By Tolu Olorunda
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Those who are yet to become engaged with the work of [Henry Giroux](#) are missing out - big time. He is an accomplished scholar in the fields of education, media, cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and entertainment. As author of more than 35 books, very few public intellectuals can lay claim to the kind of expansive career Henry has nurtured for over four decades. But he's hardly amused by academic accomplishments. Henry's devotion to the transformation of the education system, and the cultivation of democratic values in this age of market-driven control, has often put him at odds with a system he describes as "[The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex \(The Radical Imagination\)](#)." Henry Giroux is also known as a confidant and colleague, for almost two decades, of the late, legendary Paulo Freire. Giroux's work with Freire helped ignite a fiery passion in him, forever burning until the day the promise of a quality existence is extended to the hands of every living, breathing child.

I was privileged to engage Henry in conversation on several topics threatening the future of our democratic society. Included in the discourse were questions of democracy in the context of an emerging omnipresent neoliberalism, in which "the relationship between the private and the public has absolutely collapsed":

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AGENCY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RADICAL DEMOCRACY

"Critical pedagogy argues that school practices need to be informed by a public philosophy that addresses how to construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling."

-Henry Giroux, [November 1999](#).

Thanks for joining us, Dr. Giroux. I think it's appropriate to commence this discourse by defining what critical pedagogy is - a field you are largely credited as founding.

Critical pedagogy was an attempt to, in a sense, remove the question of teaching from an overwhelming, complex method of limited accountability. In other words, it was an attempt to not only politicize pedagogy itself, but to expand the parameters of what it actually does, and why it's important. In many ways, one of the things that we were concerned about, is the relationship between knowledge and power: What does it mean to talk about pedagogy as a moral and political practice, and not merely as a technique? We wanted to say: Pedagogy is directive. It's basically about the construction of different kinds of subjectivities and particular kinds of agents. And we wanted to link that notion of subjectivity to a notion of learning that expands the possibilities for democracy, social justice, equality, and a future that doesn't merely imitate the market or the past. In essence, it was a notion of pedagogy that took the question of justice and agency as inextricably connected and linked.

In your texts, you've consistently explained *agency* as the only medium through which citizens can concede demands from power. Where does the concept of agency fall, in this information age?

Agency is meant to connect questions of *self* to the *collective social*. To be an agent is to be reflective. To be an agent is to have a certain understanding of the relationship between the self and the other. To be an agent is to be able to recognize the certain skills that are demanded of citizenship. To be an agent is to have access to information, and able to make judgment and be thoughtful. In this new age, in which culture is the primary educational force, agents must construct dialogues around these sites of learning that are not simply limited to being consumers, that are not limited to this absolutely gilded age which is being subjected to market-driven logic and rationality.

As a self-described "radical democrat," what is your assessment of the current political structure?

It is inherently authoritarian. It has a legacy of democratic ideals. It's embodied in a tradition of possibilities. But, increasingly, the reality that pushes against those promises has become a cause of much alarm. We see it in the rise of Militarism, which Obama seems to be simply reinforcing. We see it in a kind of religious fundamentalism, which is always a dire force and threat to Democracy. We see it in the assault on critical thinking, which has been unleashed in ways that surprise everyone. Also, we see it in a kind of market fundamentalism that actually is driven by a contempt for democracy; a contempt for all citizens that are not driven by the obligations of consumerism; a contempt for all public spheres that are not driven by the logic of the commodity; and a contempt, basically, for any form of human dependency that used to be seen as safety nets and safety contracts that were essential to democracy.

While I will never suggest that we have moved into something like the Fascism seen in the '20s and the '30s, what I will suggest, is that Totalitarianism takes different forms at different historical moments. And I think we are as close to that moment - the totality of a kind of break down, a dysfunction in democratic values and social relationships - unlike we have ever seen before.

CAPITALISM, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE FUTURE OF MARKET-DRIVEN

VALUES

"Within the discourse of neoliberalism... issues regarding persistent poverty, inadequate healthcare, racial apartheid in the inner cities, and the growing inequalities between the rich and the poor have been either removed from the inventory of public discourse and social policy or factored into talk-show spectacles."

-Giroux, Henry. [*Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism \(Culture and Politics\)*](#). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 56.

How serious is the danger posed by public intrusion into private lives?

This question has been on my mind for the last 10 years. Central to any notion of politics is the notion of translation. What I mean by that is, we have to be able to understand how private considerations translate into social concerns, and vice versa. But I think that what has happened, and what has made our Democracy so dysfunctional, is that in the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan, we saw the emergence of a kind of market fundamentalism in which the relationship between the private and the public has absolutely collapsed. In that, the public now becomes understandable almost entirely in the realm of a privatized notion of the world.

So, when we talk about racism, we don't talk about a racial state, we don't talk about systemic racism; we talk about prejudice, we talk about racism as though it's an issue of individual psychology - it has nothing to do with power, it has nothing to do with the organization of resources, it has nothing to do with institutional and social modes of exclusion.

When we talk about poverty, we don't talk about vast inequalities caused by a market system in which 1% of the population owns 22% of household income and 44% of the national wealth. We talk about people being incompetent and lazy, that they refuse to work, that they don't have the right psychology.

Hence, the public sphere now becomes simply an outlet for private rumblings, and we have no way to understand how unemployment, homelessness, poverty, racism, and environmental issues, have to be understood by large sets of connections or social matrixes.

What effects has neoliberalism had on public discourse, private concerns and, of course, policy?

To me, it is central to the question of politics: What neoliberalism does, is it operates off the presupposition that society should be tied entirely to the logic of the market, and that questions of privatization, deregulation, and choice, are entirely economic decisions to be left in the hands of corporations, and have absolutely nothing to do with a larger set of democratic values and concerns.

And it means that the social state should be cancelled, that safety nets should be eliminated. It means that the government should deregulate the market. It means that efficiency, cost effectiveness, and the bottom line, are the only kinds of values that matter. It destroys every notion of the public sphere, of the common good, of sociality, that gives democracy its vibrancy and worth. And it seems to suggest, by the reality TV shows that mirror its most outrageous assumptions, that we live in a world marked by

all against all. And that notions of compassion, love, trust, honesty, integrity and justice - those spheres driven by non-commodified values - simply don't matter - because they don't generate profit.

But it does something more: It makes entire generations utterly disposable - because they are flawed consumers, because they are outside of the logic of the market, because they're a drain on the economy. This notion of neoliberalism has no language for justice; it has no language for compassion, it has no language for equality. It's very pernicious. And we've seen the effects of it on the economy.

What is incumbent upon progressives, to restore common sense in this age of market-driven values?

I think there are a number of things. I think that *common sense* is at the heart of one of the most abusive forms of political violence that we now see. We are surrounded by a media and educational system that seems to suggest that neoliberalism is the only alternative - that's all there is. And I think we need to once again start talking about democracy and what it means. We need to understand that at the heart of any democratic system, is not simply the promise of a greater democracy, but institutions that are questioning of power and supportive of cultures. And these institutions need to be struggled over.

We need an educational agenda that respects critical thought, and that respects solidarity. In the name of "common sense," the worst crimes are committed. And we need to understand what it means to break into that. We need to make people more thoughtful; to provide more critical understanding of what it means to be in the world; to resurrect a sense of agency that is not just privatized, but is social, collective and engaged to take on the responsibilities of what it means to be a real citizen in a democracy that has some promise.

[This is part 1 of a 3-part series titled, "Let Us Make Haste While We Can: A Conversation with Henry Giroux." Next week, Henry discusses the intertwining issues of education and media, as they affect today's Children and Youth.] Click [here](#) to read any of the commentaries in this series.


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