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**Let Us Make Haste While We Can:
A Conversation with Henry Giroux (Part 2)
The Substance of Truth
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Very few are more qualified than Henry Giroux to speak about the troubles and trials plaguing today's younger generation. In fact, as Dr. Giroux sees it, a war is being waged on this population, pillaging everything they have to offer, in deference to a rabid model of market fundamentalism and neoliberalism. The education system, largely championed as the great equalizer, is, as Giroux sees it, "in such dire trouble, that we now see schools losing their public character, as a result of these private investments." Schooling, he contends, has now become "a sort of dead time. It doesn't speak of life anymore." In this second installment, he also speaks at-length on why the younger generation "must organize and fight at every level to stop" the theft of their future:

"EDUCATION IS OUR PASSPORT TO THE FUTURE": TOMORROW AND THE REALITY OF TODAY

"As the university's civic mission is imperiled by corporatization and racial backlash, access to its resources are increasingly predicated on whiteness and wealth, and the greater public good is financially and spiritually starved [as a result]."

- Giroux, Henry; Giroux, Susan. [Take Back Higher Education: Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era](#). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004 (1st ed.), p. 170.

Is there a "crisis" in the democratic promise of education, vis-à-vis students of color?

It's hard to even begin here. I think public education and higher education are now

suffering from two kinds of crisis: A "legitimation" crisis, and a "political" crisis.

The *legitimation* crisis stems from the fact that schools no longer know what it means to align themselves with democratic ideals. They have allowed themselves to slip away from any notion that says public and higher education is central to democracy, and so, modes of educational accountability are now aligned with two things: A market notion of citizenship, and the punishing state. This means that, increasingly, schools are not only becoming privatized, but militarized. And I think that the worst this poses, especially for poor minority students, is almost overwhelming. I mean, schools are now modeled after prisons and testing centers. And it seems to me that the students who most bear the burden of this system, are the poor ones - kids who are constantly losing whatever constitutional rights they might have.

In *Take Back Higher Education*, you argue that private interests - soda companies, media and merchandise giants - are now capitalizing on the insufficient funding many public schools receive, and are offering up "partnerships" with these schools, to tap into the "52 million-strong market of public school students now required to take tests every year from the third grade on." [p. 200] Please explain.

It's shameless. Let's begin with an assumption that goes against common sense: Schools are failing, not because they are inefficient, but because they are public. That's how the Right-wing sees this. The attack on public schools is not because they don't work. It's because they are *public*. And so every attempt - organizing the curriculum to reflect corporate interests and values - to turn over school spaces to advertising agencies (billboards, advertisements in bathrooms, junk food in cafeterias) is to inform kids that the only thing that matters is the relationship between knowledge and money.

But what is at stake here is not just the commercialization of schools. It is the invasion of private interests into sacred domains. This suggests two larger issues:

One is what I refer to as: A seismic shift in the way society understands schooling. Schooling, once understood as a public good, is now understood as a private good. That is a shift of unbelievable proportions that began in the 1980s.

Secondly, schools are so underfunded, and in such dire trouble, that we now see schools losing their public character, as a result of these private investments. So, when we talk about public education, we're not talking about transforming the school system, we're talking about what is called, *Starving the Beast*. It means taking money away from the government, and doing all that is possible to create an increasing disinvestment in public education, so they can simply be turned over to private investors.

But you're also getting at something else, which is that it's also producing new kinds of subjects in schools, new kinds of students:

Students for whom democratic values are relatively meaningless, because they rarely have access to that discourse. Students who don't know what critical dialogue is about, because it doesn't take place in schools anymore. Students who can't see schools as improving their future anymore, but as a kind of stepping stone into prison. Students who now see school, as you write in [your essay](#), as a source of pain.

Schooling becomes a sort of dead time. It doesn't speak of life anymore.

In what direction must this fight go, to redeem the promise of equitable education for all?

The fundamental question here is two-fold:

How central is education to democracy?

How central are young people to the future?

Until we can address those two central issues, we're going to fail. In other words, there has to be a revolution - linguistically and theoretically - in the way we talk about education and democracy. It cannot simply be a marginal moment in what [President] Obama is talking about. We need to talk about more funding. Education must become more equitable. In my estimation, nobody should be denied a decent education. There should not be a system where there is Harvard, there is Yale, and then there is *the rest*. There should not be a system that doesn't recognize how the tax burden is structured simply to privilege the rich. We cannot speak of education in ways that disconnect the question of excellence from equity. That simply cannot happen.

DISNEY, INNOCENCE, AND THE ESSENCE OF EXPLOITATION

"First, it must become clear that Disney is not merely about peddling entertainment, it is also about politics, economics, and education.... With every product that Disney produces, whether for adults or children, there is the accompanying commercial blitzkrieg aimed at excessive consumerism, selfishness, and individualism."

- Giroux, Henry. [*The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*](#). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, p. 163.

Why did you decide to investigate Disney's impact on kids?

I think Disney is made up of a lie, a massive lie. And the lie is that corporations such as Disney, which cater to children all over the world, are basically about innocent, youthful entertainment. These are large corporations that hide their corporate power behind a mantle of innocence and pure entertainment. These are teaching machines.

How has Disney contributed to the bargain of hyper-consumerism, which, you argue, impinges on the innocence of millions of children?

It turns young people into commodities. It fills their head with junk, that the public sphere is primarily White and nothing else. There's nothing innocent about Disney, but what I think it points to, in a larger sense, is the educational force of popular culture, which does enormous damage in the ways it invades and shapes almost every aspects of young peoples' lives.

What must parents know, and do, about the risk factor that comes with [exposing kids to 40,000+ Television ads](#) a year?

I think the point is to understand what conditions make corporations like Disney possible, and how do we fight them pedagogically. We have to get parents engaged in popular culture, so that kids can not only analyze what they're being shown, but can produce and direct their own media. Corporations like Disney cannot be avoided. They have to be engaged, critically analyzed, politicized and, hopefully, transformed.

YOUTH IN A SUSPECT SOCIETY: BEYOND THE POLITICS OF DISPOSABILITY

"The relations between youth and adults have always been marked by strained generational and ideological struggles, but the new economic and social conditions that youth face today, along with a callous indifference to their spiritual and material needs, suggest a qualitatively different attitude on the part of many adults toward American youth - one that indicates that the young, especially under the Bush administration, have become our lowest national priority."

- Giroux, Henry. "[Disposable Youth in a Suspect Society: A Challenge for the Obama Administration](#)." [TruthOut](#) 25 November 2008.

Is there a war being waged against today's Youth?

Yes. When I talk about the war on youth, my argument is that something incredibly new has happened within the last 20 years, which is us finding ourselves in a society where kids are no longer part of the equation of what it means to invest in the future. We have an economic and political system that now sees kids as utterly disposable.

This is a generation that is under constant surveillance. This is a generation that is no longer seen as being troubled, but trouble itself. This is a generation no longer at risk; they are the risk. This is a generation we no longer invest in, because it constitutes a long-term investment. And, as I write in [my new book](#), this is a generation now characterized as "suspects." And I think that when we talk about the war on Youth, there are two kinds of wars:

There's the *soft* war: The war in which Youth are increasingly commodified, and simply turned into a market. Their humanity is disregarded, and the interest is simply making a profit from them and on them.

Then there's the *hard* war, which is much worse: The war marked by an increasing transition from schools to jails. It is also marked by kids being tried as adults, by the criminalization of almost all social issues kids face. This is a generation that is, in a sense, being governed through the axis of crime. And we've never since this before. This is not just a crisis. It's worse than that. This is going to cripple, if not stop, generations of young people in unimaginable ways.

I mean, what does it say when: One in three Black Youth in the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 27 at some point in their life will end up in prison; when 70% of all inmates in prison today are people of color. I mean, this is just outright "State Racism." There's no other way to talk about it.

This is apartheid on *speed*, apartheid on *coke*. It's a silent apartheid of sorts, because it hides under the discourse of "color-blindness;" it hides under the discourse of "privatization;" it hides under the discourse of "psychology" and "Racelessness." That's why it's so pernicious.

My wife [Dr. Susan Giroux] constantly reminds me that it's not just an attitude framed in a psychology; it's organized through a Youth-controlled complex that is made up of an enormous number of social structures and institutional forces.

What is the politics of zero-tolerance? And what are its consequences?

Zero-tolerance is a disaster for American schooling. It criminalizes school policies in such a way that they are now taking almost entirely away from principals and teachers,

and handed basically to the police. There's a bifurcation currently at work in the school system, which suggests that any behavior outside of the norm must be dealt with by the punishing apparatus, over which schools now have very little control. Kids are now being treated as prisoners.

How can this young generation engage the future in a way that sustains its dignity?

I think we now live in a time, unlike the past, where kids have no sense of the future. So, Youths must organize and fight at every level to stop this. I think they need to write about it, and they do. They need to make it clear that the lives they live in schools are of pain, injustice and, in many cases, cruelty. They need to rebel against these absolutely horrendous testing policies. And they need to do it across the country. I don't think there is currently a more important struggle going on, than that over the war on Youth.

[This is part 2 of a 3-part series titled, "Let Us Make Haste While We Can: A Conversation with Henry Giroux." Click [here](#) to read any of the commentaries in this series.. Next week, Henry discusses the promises, possibilities and perils of Obama's presidency.]


For more on the topic of Youth, see Henry Giroux's upcoming book, "[Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?](#)"


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