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**Let Us Make Haste While We Can:
A Conversation with Henry Giroux (Part 3)
The Substance of Truth
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For some, the first five months of Obama's presidency have marked the dawn of a new era; a time when governance is filtered through the channels of pragmatism and diplomacy. For others, these five months have confirmed a belief long-held before candidate Obama overtook Hillary Clinton to become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee - that he was not the change-agent he had so eloquently claimed to be.

In between these two factions are those who believe that while President Obama has acted less progressively than candidate Obama spoke, there are immense democratic possibilities within his administration that cannot simply be disregarded. Henry Giroux is one of those believers.

In this final installment, he speaks on why Obama must be pushed up "against the wall." It would take progressives to do the pushing, he says. For that to happen, however, we must come to terms with the realities of President Obama's foreign and domestic policies, and "take him seriously in terms of what he said he might do." Progressives can't afford to "believe in heroes." Obama is not one. He is a politician who, while brimming with great promise, is commander of the world's most powerful army:

BARACK OBAMA, HISTORY, AND THE MYSTERY OF MYTH

"All of the talk about a post-racial society in light of Obama's election is meaningless as long as young people of color are disproportionately criminalized at younger and younger ages, allowed to disappear into the growing ranks of the criminal justice system and increasingly viewed as a racial threat to society rather than as a crucial social, political and economic

investment."

- Giroux, Henry. "[Locked Out and Locked Up: Youth Missing in Action From Obama's Stimulus Plan](#)." *TruthOut* 17 February 2009.

"We need more than a president who speaks movingly about children, but does little to address the urgency of the immediate crisis. We need more than sloganized language of "change" and "hope," one that goes well beyond philanthropy and individual charity and transforms government in the interests of both children's and democracy's future."

- Giroux, Henry. "[Children of the Recession: Remembering 'Manchild in the Promised Land'](#)." *The Black Commentator* 11 June 2009.

How do you gauge the first 4 months of President Obama's presidency?

I think President Obama symbolizes a mix of the best and the worst. I think that, in his heart, he's a genuinely good person. But that's not enough. I don't think we judge people by their intentions. I think we judge them by their policies. And I think we have to understand that Obama is the tip of the iceberg.

I think Obama has opened up a space of possibilities; but I think that we fail in our inability to, in a sense, push him left. He's already made a number of bad judgments. Everything from the financial advisors he surrounds himself with; to his views on education; to his views on foreign policy; to his views on torture, rendition and "State Secrets."

But those decisions are not *undoable*. And I think with Obama, there is a sense that as more people recognize that power comes from the bottom-up, and not the top-down, we'll seize the possibilities.

Speaking of bad judgments, what does the selection of Arne Duncan say about President Obama's conception of education?

It says that he doesn't know much about it. It's outside of his league. If he really believed that education and democracy matter, and public education is important, he would never have turned over the schools and education policy to a guy who's basically a free-market fundamentalist-militarist. He had a much better pick: Linda Darling Hammond.

The match between Linda Darling Hammond and Arnie Duncan is like Muhammad Ali fighting a blind man. That's the difference between her and Arne Duncan. And he chose Arne Duncan.

He [Duncan] doesn't know anything about education. He hasn't read Paulo Freire, or any other critical educators. He really believes education is a business, that students are customers.

What does the selection of Judge Sotomayor say about President Obama's conception of justice?

I think he's attentive to questions of representation. He's a former constitutional lawyer. He knows exactly what Bush did the last eight years, and I think, in a way, the politics of centrism gets in the way for him. I think she's certainly a choice with enormous potential, but there were better choices.

Obama is a consummate politician, and he tends to lose sight of the deficit that comes to bear around questions of justice.

He needs to recognize that to be a *President that matters*, is to lead with courage. He can't just simply be a centrist. He can't just simply aim to please. He can't just simply cater to normalized notions of power that exist in Washington. He's got to unsettle.

There's no such thing as "post-partisanship" in Washington. That's a joke. And I'm surprised he hasn't learned anything from that.

Obama's historical election has been interpreted by many as the realization of Dr. King's dream, the fruition of color-blindness, and the culmination of a "post-racial" society. What prompted these impulses of irrationality?

I think that there was such a need to not only believe that we had made great strides around issues of racial justice, but hope that, in some ways, that struggle was coming to an end. I think it was part of a dreamscape, wedded to a kind of liberal ideology that has always been somewhat dishonest about the realities of racism. I think it was a redemptive moment; one that was assuring but also deceiving. It was one that was therapeutic and mobilizing, but also unwilling to admit that the battle had just begun. It seems to me that in that moment of redemption, there was a moment of exhaustion.

A "moment of exhaustion"?

Yes. It ignored questions of power and prisons. It ignored the educational deficit and the attack on immigrants. It ignored the rising incarceration and ongoing re-segregation efforts around American schools.

A whole generation of young Black men and women are being consigned to a life of utter disposability and excess. Think of Katrina! How, after Katrina, can we ever talk about a "post-racial" society! Katrina is the *un-redemptive moment*.

How do agents assert their will on this administration?

We can't believe in heroes. We have to believe in social movements. Let's push him up against the wall. Let's take him seriously in terms of what he said he might do. Let's open the contradictions. Let's mobilize in front of the White House. Let's use direct action.

What advice would you give to Obama, in matters of foreign and domestic policies?

The first thing he should do, in terms of progressive possibilities, is think of the world his children are going to inherit, and then think, under that scope, of all children. If he can't do that, he can't possibly muster-up the courage to perform complex and difficult tasks that address long term investments.

He has to align himself with progressive forces, and bring in dissenting voices. He's got to expand the influence of the powerless, so they can register their voices and be heard.

[This is the final installment 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.]

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