Neoliberalism and the Attack on Education: An Interview with Henry A. Giroux

Heather McLean

Heather McLean[1] (HM): In your latest book, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, you identify the broad project of neoliberalism as the key mode of governance, policy and ideology threatening public education. What are your greatest concerns? How can we fight back?

Henry A. Giroux[2] (HAG): Public and higher education are under siege in neoliberal societies for a number of reasons. First, they are under attack because they are public, not necessarily because they are failing. As public sites, they offer potential spaces, pedagogies, and modes of thinking that are critical, thoughtful, and, frankly, dangerous because they not only offer the conditions to inspire students to be self-reflective and critically engaged, but also energize them to connect what they learn to what it might mean to hold power accountable, address social injustices, and both imagine and struggle for a more just world. Public and higher education are considered dangerous because they harbor the possibility of speaking the unspeakable, uttering critical thoughts, producing dissent, and creating students willing to hold power accountable. The apostles of neoliberalism, on the other hand, want to eliminate the critical function of public education on all levels and they are working hard to transform these institutions into disimagination factories. My biggest fear that as more and more students labour under onerous debt, subjected to a form of indentured citizenship, coupled with modes of

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education that are utterly instrumental and depoliticizing, they will become less and less interested in defining themselves as individual and social agents. Inhabiting zones of hardship, suffering, exclusion, and joblessness, young people increasingly live in fear as they struggle to survive social conditions and policies more characteristic of authoritarian governments than democratic states.

Indeed, many young people around the globe appear to be caught in a sinister web of ethical and material poverty manufactured by a state that trades in suspicion, bigotry, state-sanctioned violence, and disposability. Democracy loses its character as a disruptive element, a force of dissent, an insurrectional call for responsible change; democracy all but degenerates into an assault on the radical imagination, reconfigured as a force for whitewashing all ethical and moral considerations. What is left is a new kind of authoritarianism and depoliticized individuals increasingly subjected to regimes of greed, dispossession, fear, and surveillance that becomes normalized. These dark times that are now pushing more and more societies into a distinct form of neoliberal authoritarianism demand a new political language and strategies to match.

First, educators and others need to figure out how to defend more vigorously public and higher education as a public good and democratic public sphere. Given the global attack on all levels of education, it is crucial for faculty, students, and others to be able to articulate how central it is in producing the formative culture necessary to educate young people to be critical and engaged agents willing to fight to deepen and expand the promises of a substantive democracy.

Second, this also means addressing what the optimum conditions are for educators, artists, activists and other cultural workers to perform their work in an autonomous and critical fashion. In other words, we need to think through the conditions that make academic labour fruitful, engaging, and relevant. In addition to developing an international movement for the defense of public goods, especially public and higher education, we need to turn the growing army of temporary workers now swelling the ranks of the academy into full-time, permanent faculty. The presence of so many part-time employees is scandalous and it both weakens the power of the faculty and exploits them. The neoliberal governing model must be abolished for more democratic modes of power sharing and faculty must fight diligently for eliminating all of the corporate and other fundamentalist ideological and structural forces that prevent this from happening.

Third, how we view the role and purpose of education is inextricably linked to how we address young people as critical and engaged critical agents who are willing to take risks, engage in thoughtful dialogue, and address what it means to be socially responsible. Students must be treated as engaged learners, critical citizens, and socially responsible agents, rather than as commodities and consumers. This suggests developing modes of pedagogy that are about the practice of freedom; that is, pedagogical practices that create the conditions for students to be self-reflective, critical, and self-conscious about their relationship with others and to know something about their relationship with the larger world. Pedagogy in this sense not only provides important thoughtful and intellectual competencies; it also enables people to act effectively upon the societies in which they live. This is a pedagogy that both inspires and energizes by making knowledge meaningful in order to be both critical and transformative.

Finally, the attack on public and higher education must be understood as part of a systemic attack by neoliberalism on all public goods and institutions that do not serve the interests of the military-industrial-surveillance state. The attack on the social state and the rise of the punishing state go hand-in-hand with the attack on education under regimes of neoliberalism.

HM: You claim that public intellectuals, academics who connect their scholarship to important public issues, play an important role in generating critical debate. Can you elaborate?

HAG: Neoliberalism is a toxin that is generating a predatory class of the walking dead who are producing what might be called dead zones of the imagination. This points to both a political and educational challenge for academics. Faculty have a moral and political responsibility to connect their scholarship to those important social issues that make clear that the role of both public and higher education and pedagogy itself must be part of a broader political and moral practice that believes that issues of justice and democracy are worth fighting for in both the classroom and the larger society. The time has come for academics to develop political languages and transformative pedagogies in which critical understanding, civic values, and social responsibility – and the institutions that support them – become central to invigorating and fortifying a new era of civic imagination, a renewed sense of social agency, and an impassioned international social movement with the vision, organization, and set of strategies capable of challenging the neoliberal nightmare engulfing the planet. Surely, this is one role that academics

can take on in order not only to defend the conditions of their own labour but to make clear to a wider public why education is central to the struggle for a substantive democracy.

Academics can play a vital role in helping broader publics recognize that the attack on higher education cannot be fully comprehended outside of the attack on the welfare state, social provisions, public servants, and democratic public spheres. Nor can such attacks be understood outside of the production of the neoliberal subject, one who is atomized, unable to connect private issues to larger public considerations, while being taught to believe in a form of radical individualism that enables a fast withdrawal from the public sphere and the claims of economic and social justice. As Stefan Collini has argued, under the regime of neoliberalism, the "social self' has been transformed into the "disembedded individual," just as the notion of public and higher education as a public good are now repudiated by the privatizing and atomistic values at the heart of a hyper-market driven society. I would think that in a time of systemic violence and terror, the individualizing of the social, the militarization of everyday life, and the ever present policies of permanent warfare overtaking the globe, that faculty would do more than retreat into the cult of professionalism, the impenetrable jargon of specialization, or succumb to the seductions of corporate power.

Some academics such as Stanley Fish claim that faculty should not address important social issues in either their research or teaching. To do so is to run the risk of not only becoming incapable of defending public and higher education as a vital public sphere, but also of having no influence over the conditions of their own intellectual labour. Without their intervention as public intellectuals, education defaults on its role as a democratic public sphere willing to produce an informed public, enact and sustain a culture of questioning, and enable a critical formative culture that advances not only the power of the imagination but also what Kristen Case calls moments of classroom grace. Pedagogies of classroom grace allows students to reflect critically on commonsense understandings of the world, and begin to question, however troubling, their sense of agency, relationship to others, and their relationship to the larger world. This is a pedagogy that asks why we have wars, massive inequality, a surveillance state, the commodification of everything, and the collapse of the public into the private. This is not merely a methodical consideration but also a moral and political practice because it presupposes that the creation of critically engaged students can imagine a future in which justice, equality, freedom, and democracy

matter. Gayatri Spivak is right in asking academics the question: "Can one insist on the importance of a training in the humanities in the time of legitimized violence?" Of course, this question applies to all levels of education and whatever subject is being taught.

HM: In your writing, you discuss how an erosion of social responsibility, public values and community is shaping everyday life in North America. Can you comment here about everyday ways to contest neoliberal hegemony?

HAG: One essential issue is to recognize that politics is not exclusively about economic power or what might be called the financialization of all aspects of society. It is also about culture, the politics of subjectivity, or what can be called the educative nature of politics itself. The left, for the most part, has ignored the importance of education being central to politics because it refuses to acknowledge matters concerning how right-wing formative cultures work to produce subjects that internalize their own oppression as a political issue and not merely an academic one.

The issue of politics being educative, of recognizing that matters of pedagogy, subjectivity, desire, and consciousness are at the heart of political and moral concerns should not be lost on academics and students. As the late Pierre Bourdieu argued, it is important for all of us to recognize that the most important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical, and lie on the side of belief and persuasion. This suggests that it is crucial to recognize that academics and other cultural workers bear an enormous responsibility for challenging this form of domination. The late Stuart Hall's remarks are instructive here. He recently insisted that the state of progressive thought is in jeopardy in that, as he puts it, "The left is in trouble. It's not got any ideas, it's not got any independent analysis of its own, and therefore it's got no vision. It just takes the temperature…It has no sense of politics being educative, of politics changing the way people see things."[3] Of course, Hall is not suggesting the left has no ideas to speak of. He is suggesting that such ideas are often removed from the larger issue of what it means to address education and the production and reception of meaningful ways of thinking as a pedagogical practice that is central to politics itself. He is also saying that the left and progressives are often short of ideas that can move people. In other words, there is no sense of how to make ideas meaningful in order to make them critical and transformative. Theoretically, this means that educators and others can work

[3] Williams, Z. (2012, February 11). The Saturday Interview: Stuart Hall, *The Guardian*, http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2012/feb/11/saturday-interview-stuart-hall

to create public spaces where desires, subjectivities, and identities can be produced capable of fostering critical and engaged individual and social agents. Such struggles demand a new notion of politics, one in which progressives work with social movements to create educational apparatuses dedicated to creating new political formations capable of challenging neoliberal notions of commonsense through a discourse of both critique and possibility. Neoliberalism produces anti-public spaces that function as disimagination zones, spaces that produce forms of social and civic death. Academics and others must reclaim the radical imagination by rethinking the crucial relationship among cultural institutions, power, and everyday life. Given the assault on both subjectivity and popular needs, it is crucial to reinvent the meaning of democracy, create a comprehensive vision of change, and develop new political formations that are international in scope.

HM: Many of my peers are piecing together a living as contract faculty, researchers and part-time workers in other sectors. What are your thoughts on working towards labour equity and social justice for all university workers? Can you comment on strategies for greater reciprocity and solidarity with workers in other labour networks?

HAG: I think working towards labour equity and social justice for all university workers is a noble and important ideal because it provides a discourse for organizing diverse groups of workers in the academy around a number of common themes. At the same time, it forces such groups to redefine the nature and purpose of education and why it is so central to any viable notion of politics and change. In addition, such struggles point to the need for academics and others to build alliances with other groups and social movements outside of the university as part of a more comprehensive struggle not just for education as a public good but for expanding and deepening the struggle for democracy itself. The left historically has been too fragmented, mired in often strangulating forms of identity politics that become zones of political purity that shut down rather than open up possibilities for new alliances and broader movements while retaining the spirit of specific struggles. Particular struggles for freedom must be aligned with more general struggles so a broad based political formation can be developed to offset neoliberal hegemony and global power relations.

HM: I am currently a university researcher in the UK where public research funders are pressuring academics to prove their usefulness in terms of developing partnerships with civil society groups, public-private partnerships, 'regeneration' initiatives and community organizations

to name a few. Does this emphasis on 'impact' undermine the work of public intellectuals? Or does it open up new contradictions or spaces for critique and critical engagement?

HAG: I think it does both. Surely, the current governments in the US, UK, and Australia view such alliances as a way to consolidate corporate control over the university, faculty, the academic fields, and students. At the same time, the ideologies driving these counter-reforms can be a challenge for the misery, powerlessness, and damage they do to any democratic society and in doing so hopefully new alliances can be opened up with a range of groups that can assume a less instrumental and more democratic role in such alliances.

HM: What are your thoughts on the role of artistic practice as a radical pedagogical strategy in a moment when universities, think tanks and arts institutions are caught up in the 'buzz' of neoliberal 'creative city' and 'innovation' regimes?

HAG: Neoliberalism kills the radical imagination which is crucial to any real definition of creativity so central to artistic public spheres. Surely, neoliberal attempts to colonize the arts and to turn them into a hegemonic pedagogical force for imposing modes of political conformity must be challenged on both political and pedagogical grounds. Crucial here is the need for academics, artists, and other cultural workers to provide an alternative understanding of the potential of the arts as a radical pedagogical practice and strategy. The attempts to colonize the arts as an extension of neoliberal public pedagogy and repression testifies to how cultural apparatuses have become increasingly responsible for the darkness that surrounds us. This recognition points to more than despair, it also opens up the possibilities for new alliances with artists and other cultural workers while extending the power of radical pedagogical practices.