Z Magazine
The Spirit of Resistance Lives

Youth in a Suspect Society

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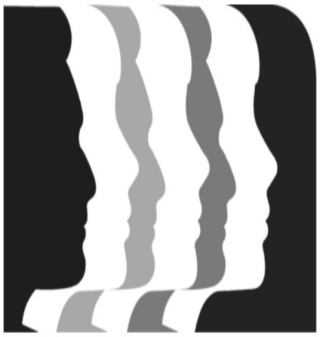
By **Seth Kershner**



Writer and public education advocate Henry Giroux is the Global Television Chair professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, a position he has held since 2004. He previously served on the faculties of Miami University of Ohio and Boston University. A prolific writer, Giroux has published five books in the past two years. In one of his latest, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?*, he calls attention to the contemporary attack on youth and public schools.

KERSHNER: You now have 47 books to your credit, including 3 published in the last year. I'd like to hear about how you approach the process of writing

GIROUX: First, I don't define myself as a scholar. I define myself as an intellectual. My writings are political interventions. Writing is a way for me to connect my position in a university with a broader public audience. Given the role that the university plays as one of the few remaining public spheres, I believe that academics have a responsibility to use that sphere politically. Second, I cut and paste everything I read. I scan articles for organizing ideas and go back to read them again. So I have a constant reservoir of material that's always at hand. I operate off a system that makes it easier for me to collect information, put it together, and then make associations that ordinarily I wouldn't see. Third, after I was denied tenure at Boston University in 1981, I sort of got exiled to remote places.

Oxford, Ohio, for example, where Miami University is located.

Right. That wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis. So I had a lot of time to write.

You raised a point about experiencing forms of exile in your career. What made you move to Canada?

First and foremost I came to McMaster because I love the school. That was an opportunity that we just could not pass up. The other side of it is that Penn State made it very easy for me to leave. I had a dean at the time who was a business-oriented guy who couldn't imagine anybody connecting education to broader public issues or writing about social justice. There are plenty of people like him in higher education now.

None quite as bad as John Silber, president of Boston University during your time there. Wasn't it Silber who offered to keep you on the teaching staff on the condition that he be your personal tutor for a year?

That was the most bizarre meeting I've ever had in my life. First of all, his office was in a Back Bay penthouse in Boston. I was summoned to see him because there were lots of individuals and groups demonstrating against his refusal to give me tenure. I had already published two books and had developed an international reputation. But Silber had announced in the school newspaper that he wanted to get rid of me. Then, when I got there, he said to me: "It's so odd. How can you be a good teacher and write such shit?" When he made that proposal about tutoring me in order to keep me on the faculty, I made some sarcastic remark about wanting to turn me into George Will, to which he responded by turning and facing the wall until I left his office. After Silber resigned his position at Boston University, they discovered that he had kept a "blacklist" of despised professors. Hearing that I was on the list was one of the proudest moments of my life.

Your work both as a writer and as a teacher of teachers has always been informed by the idea that education can be used as a tool to combat social oppression.

Actually, it's a little more extensive than that. We not only have education in the schools—and everybody knows how important that can be for a literate public—but in recent years, the educational force of popular culture has really become the primary site of education. A variety of sites are producing something I call public pedagogy. These are very powerful sites that are educating people in ways that are destructive to democracy, often in ways that normalize everything from the tenets of market fundamentalism to hyper-competitive notions of masculinity.

In Youth and a Suspect Society you suggest the need to broaden this democratic project of education to include cultural workers outside the schools. What role do you envision for, let us say, public librarians?

What I find interesting is I get an enormous amount of mail from librarians. Librarians, in their fundamental role as gatekeepers for an informed citizenry and a democratic mode of literacy, make sure that so-called dangerous books don't get suppressed and they make sure that books that matter are made available to the public. Librarians, at least in my interactions with them, see themselves as occupying a very crucial public sphere centered around the question of how information is produced, disseminated, legitimated, and taken up in other spheres. So I think they play a fundamental role.

The stereotype, of course, is that teenagers only care about themselves and couldn't be less engaged in politics or the life of the broader community. Do you think young people have an interest in social justice?

I think that the argument that they don't care about anything is just another example of what I call the war on youth. That's nothing more than an attempt to demonize youth and to claim they're worthless. It's just a way of saying we don't need to invest in them, they don't count, they're a disposable population or they're trouble and, as trouble, their behavior needs to be criminalized and policed. So, on one level, that argument is political and serves the neoliberal project of simply not investing in youth and criminalizing working-class youth or youth of color. On the other side of this, I think youth are incredibly involved. Far more involved, in fact, than we realize. We see it now in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana. We don't have young people taking part in massive demonstrations like they are doing in parts of Europe and the Middle East, but I think there are specific reasons for that. And I don't think that those reasons are to be laid at the feet of young people, but they need to be laid at the feet of a generation of adults who have given young people a society in which it becomes pretty difficult to raise your voice in protest.

What's the state of progressive education in this country?

It's under siege like nothing we've ever seen. On one level, there's the ongoing attempt to corporatize and privatize public schools.

Increasingly we're de-funding public schools so that—stuck in a state of crisis which we created—they can be literally taken over by private interests. Then you have an allegedly progressive president of the United States who is worse than President Bush in his educational policies. Just look at Arne Duncan. He has no compassion whatsoever for the public schools. As you know, when he ran the Chicago school system, he created more military public schools in Chicago than any other city in the country. Duncan takes his cues directly from the ideology, values, and practices of the marketplace.

What do you think John Dewey would have to say about those military public schools?

I think he'd roll over in his grave. Dewey talked about schools being related to democracy. Dewey thought that education laid the foundation for students to become critical and social agents so that they could learn how to both govern and be governed. What military public schools suggest is that the ultimate aim of education is to be a kind of disciplinary apparatus that in its worst moments educates students to take part in the war machine and a society dedicated to the production of organized violence.

What do you mean by "dreaming in moderation?"

You don't want to disable hope by proposing something that is impossible to achieve. Hope has to be grounded in something realistic. It has to be grounded in real problems and long-term struggles. When we dream in moderation it doesn't mean that we don't have big dreams. It means that big dreams sometimes require big struggles. These struggles take place not only in large policy discussions, but at the level of everyday life. You plant seeds, you organize to build a movement. You translate private problems into broader social considerations. So dreaming in moderation means that we dream with everybody else about what is possible in a substantive democracy. We don't dream alone.

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