

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

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### **Henry Giroux's *Abandoned Generation* & Critical Librarianship: A Review Article**

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*Giroux's Critical Project*

For the past two decades, Henry Giroux has been one of the most important and influential thinkers in the areas of critical pedagogy, cultural studies and radical educational theory. Giroux advocates a cultural criticism that is guided by a philosophical and moral attention to struggle for, and make imperative, the assembly of the pedagogical conditions that make the merging of social critique with utopian ideals, not only a theoretical strategy to address and alter social formations that limit social justice, but also a guiding model for the concretization of a radical democratic citizen: one capable of critically engaging and acting within the social, cultural, and economic spheres, where their individual subjectivities are connected to a universal, pluralist and moral understanding of what it means to theorize more inclusively, act more ethically, and deliberate more collectively in today's society. As capitalist democracies increasingly organize society around the cynical values projected by consumer capitalism and destructive domestic and foreign policies, Giroux's work draws our attention to the way in which the linking of cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and notions of transformative practices can address both the problems and possible solutions facing educators, librarians, activists, and other cultural workers committed to putting forward alternative values and developing new ways of laying bare the connections between professional practices and social, political, and ideological processes that inform the structural foundations of the wider society. Over the past decade, his work has grown more germane not only for educators but also cultural workers from a variety of public professions and institutions, including librarianship. By broadening the scope of his analytical emphases to include a more revealing and nuanced understanding of political economy, pedagogy, and the cultural production of identities, he continues to speak with a clear and uncompromised language that reminds, reaffirms, and argues for both educators and a diverse coalition of public professions to courageously fight to make possible radical politics and pedagogies that function on both a material and cultural level. Giroux's belief, that totalizing

political and economic issues must not always eclipse those located within the cultural realm, represents a distinguishing aspect of his work and one that clearly positions him reflexively between philosophical traditions ranging from Frankfurt School/Gramscian Marxism, Freirian pedagogy, British cultural studies, and critical postmodernism. Giroux's work often explores how social justice issues emanating from aggregate social, economic and political formations often fail to adequately address the normative constituents within the non-material terrain of cultural production and representation (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, occupation) that provide animation when inscribed to produce subjectivities, practices, and identities.

The language of critique established by Giroux is characterized by a commitment to continuously re-envision utopian possibility and social reconstruction around our categories and forms of criticism while always stressing the catalytic force of hope as a central constituent in the struggle for a more just and substantive democracy. Wedding a purposeful hope to social struggle remains for Giroux, more than simply the expression of a slogan emptied of substance or a depoliticized parody of rebellion. Rather, hope is a specific characteristic essential to the political, cultural, and pedagogical strategies of opposition that cultural workers are encouraged to adopt in order to revitalize the language of critique in tandem with mounting alternative resistance and vocabularies that address contemporary society both philosophically and materially. Giroux captures such a sentiment in the following:

Hope is more than romantic idealism, it is also the condition that highlights images of an alternative politics and pedagogy. It is the basis for prompting modes of resistance, and it offers up glimpses of possibility gleaned from a reading of history. Hope is not simply wishful thinking; it is written into those various struggles waged by brave men and women for civil rights, racial justice, decent working conditions, and a society cleansed of war. It takes its form in both small and large struggles waged by individuals and groups who have not been afraid to step forward and say no to the forces of oppression, greed, and injustice. Hope is the refusal to stand still in the face of human suffering, and it is learned by example of civic courage. (43)<sup>1</sup>

Giroux's work focuses our attention upon the importance of not only the need for cultural workers to wed strategies of critique to models of praxis, but just as vital, the need to link social analysis with a collection of politicized values that function to make cultural workers "more critical in their thinking and more visionary in their purpose."<sup>2</sup>

Giroux's passionate yet consciously reflective optics of analysis, provide his multi-perspective critiques with a grounding and context that expose and criticize the sources of unjust and cruel policies imposed upon those peoples

and practices historically and systemically marginalized, silenced, and relegated to the status of Other. For Giroux, those dominant cultural discourses derivative of the power of capitalism to define and reconfigure the way in which we learn, teach, communicate, and legitimate particular social norms and values ultimately serve as ballast to the widespread neoliberal campaign of mass privatization efforts, the dissolution of public spaces, the deregulation of a culture of predatory commercialism, and the blind triumphalism of a market centered logic as the singular, philosophical means of framing issues central to governance, economic policy formation, educational practice, and social welfare. Primarily interested in subject matters that include pedagogical practices, film analysis, the politics of schooling, disciplinary border crossing, and the ways in which youth identities are constructed through and by filtered representations produced by the mass media and advertisement campaigns, Giroux's theoretical insights and vision continue to constitute a vital point of reference in the fight against both liberal and conservative notions of democratic values, the role of public institutions and the ethico-political function of cultural workers, organic intellectuals<sup>3</sup> and educators.

Giroux's work is highly translatable and applicable to librarians because he constantly puts forward trenchant critiques that draw out and illuminate the ways in which the production, circulation, and consumption of information, knowledge, and meaning are never innocent but instead sutured to issues of power, political economy, and specific subject positions organized along class, racial, gender, and sexual orientation lines. Giroux's work, which represents the best of what has been recently dubbed public intellectualism, takes a leading role in addressing how and why public institutions such as schools, higher education, and libraries should be boldly fought for and why their value as sites of struggle and contestation requires further diagnosis, critique, and engaged participation. Giroux's critical project represents a reflexive engagement with analyzing both the productive and consumptive nature of cultural practices through a critical pedagogy framework that provides new depth and texture to our understanding of the problematic interplay between agency, subjectivities, cultural practices, and a political economy where the power of ideology finds its most dominating and ubiquitous expression. Cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg addresses the dynamic nature and political possibilities of cultural studies from which Giroux molds his most investigative and important works, by suggesting that cultural studies, while not without its theoretical faults, tends to avoid the limitations of over-deterministic or reductionist frameworks of analysis when he asserts that theorists like Giroux have recognized a valuable opportunity "to develop the broader implications of pedagogy in cultural studies by addressing how the production of knowledge, values, and collective identities takes place within particular social, historical, cultural, institutional, and textual formations."<sup>4</sup>

In his new book, *The Abandoned Generations*, Giroux addresses the demonization of youth before and after the terrorist attacks that took place

on September 11th, 2001. He argues that the crisis facing pre- and post-9/11 youth should be seen as a vicious war of everyday life, mobilized as a moral, economic, political, and cultural conflict waged by “liberals, conservatives, corporate interests, and religious fundamentalists against those public spaces, goods and laws that view children and youth as an important social investment” that includes “a full-scaled attack on social services, the welfare state, and the public schools.”<sup>5</sup> Citing youth as an easy target to consign the blame for crime, poverty, violence and drug use, Giroux believes that adult society, organized and defined around the primacy of commercial culture and the “debasement language of advertising and consumerism”<sup>6</sup> is without the political language and critical capacity to think beyond the obvious limits and inequalities underwriting the “values and practices of neoliberal capitalism and the complex cultural and economic operations of this assault.”<sup>7</sup> Framed as a broader social problematic stemming from economic, cultural, and pedagogical conditions that deny youth rights while exploiting them both as a market niche and sexualized subject constructed in order to sell corporate America’s empty brands and images, Giroux suggests that adults have written their own dystopian values of selfish individuality, fear, greed, and cynicism onto the lives of youth and children without providing them voice or forum to imagine alternative perspectives and ways of being external to the dictates of a rapacious and homogenizing consumerism. Giroux also dedicates much of the book to showing how corporate culture represents the primary pedagogical apparatus for socializing and inscribing specific representations onto not only youth and their understanding of the multiple spheres they inhabit, but citizens in general, when he skillfully shows how popular films and the representations they construct, mold gender and racial identities, manipulate historical memory and work as a kind of public pedagogy that requires serious contextualization and varied readings. Much of the rest of the book is dedicated to condemning the Bush administration’s callous disregard for society’s most marginalized citizens, analysis of the films *Ghost World* and *Baby Boy*, a discussion of the effort to privatize education, a look at the difficult task of mobilizing a viable political movement that includes diverse constituencies, an argument for the establishment of a renewed utopian project that confronts contemporary problems with innovative solutions, and a brilliant examination of the collapse of democratic culture in post 9-11 America.

#### *The War Against Youth*

The war against youth for Giroux has been waged within a broader neoliberal assault upon the public sphere, immigrants, people of color, the environment, and basic social provisions including sustainable wages, quality health care, childcare programs, employment opportunities, affordable housing, a meaningful education, and mental health resources. Shifting from the post-World War II welfare statism and Keynesian economic paradigm practiced by Western capitalist societies to a right wing cultural agenda informed by a fundamentalist approach to the world that perceives all things public, so-

cial and uncommodified as obstacles to the unregulated laws of the market and commercial profit, youth are no longer viewed as signifiers for a future more successful and secure than the present. For Giroux, the future promises very little for most youth, especially those children who are even further demonized and socially excluded because of their class or race. The ability of youth to imagine a future defined by social conditions other than crass marketing, endless commodification, widespread poverty, commercialized culture, intractable unemployment, physical objectification, zero tolerance policing, institutional surveillance, endemic violence, and political corruption becomes an almost impossible task with the growing collapse of the public sphere, state welfare, and the notion that adult society establish socially responsible provisions, opportunities, and safety nets that attend to the needs of vulnerable and powerless children. The increasingly vanishing democratic possibilities that underscore and give meaning to the notion of citizenship, in Giroux's view, have been replaced with a consumer culture that strips society of those critical capacities and public resources required for a meaningful and responsive democracy, to deliberate collectively, to allow for pluralist views including that of youth, and to appraise the success or failure of social policies based upon informed notions of the public good, social justice, economic equity, and civic responsibility.

Giroux's timely and indispensable polemic maps the variety of ways in which democracy has been replaced with a predatory capitalism that functions not to expand sustainable living conditions but rather to extinguish hope, human agency, and the basic freedoms that provide the possibilities for a cohesive yet diverse civic culture: one that struggles to promote a radical collection of ideals including community, collective responsibility, tolerance, economic justice, and the embracing of cultural difference. Thoughtfully discussed and buttressed with Giroux's visionary clarity, *The Abandoned Generation* implores cultural workers to take up the fight to provide greater meaning and substance to democracy's rhetoric and promises. Giroux asks that we as a society begin to deliberate with greater attention to the severity and complexity of social problems and their potential solutions. For Giroux, political quick fixes and sound bytes imbued with arrogance and moral absolutism will not increase security, provide sustainable living for all citizens, or contribute to a wider conversation about the very meaning and purpose of civic culture, democratic life and social justice.

For librarians and libraries, Giroux's work reflects the kind of scholarship and political commitment imperative to understanding the implications of their policies, practices, and services and how they function within broader social matrices that often serve to reproduce dominant social formations that thwart many of the values and missions traditionally addressed by the library profession. The notion of a critical librarianship may in fact appear too much as big picture thinking or theoretically abstracted from what "we actually do" in everyday contexts. I would argue that conceptualizing the big picture of librarianship as a socially constructed subject that informs, structures, and

provides meaning to the everyday aspects of practice must not be overlooked because of the current primacy and fetishization of technique, but rather we should think of the essence of such a focus as a continuous, reflexive, professional engagement on the part of library workers to be more inquisitive, idealistic, engaged and attentive.

### *The Need to Reconstruct a Critical Librarianship*

Why read Henry Giroux's newest book? How do the writings of an academic who has not directly taken up issues central to library work constitute a relevant source for understanding libraries and their role in shaping and reflecting the wider society? While not specifically located within the canonical or contemporary discourses of library and information science (LIS), the critical tradition, best embodied in the work of cultural critics such as Giroux, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, Douglas Kellner, Cornell West, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Herbert Marcuse, Manning Marble, Raymond Williams, Nancy Fraser, Lawrence Grossberg, Pierre Bourdieu, Fredric Jameson, Jurgen Habermas, and Paulo Freire, has been radically under-theorized and neglected as an optics of inquiry and contextual grounding for addressing issues regarding race, class, gender power, knowledge and sociopolitical formations derived from capitalist hegemony. Following their clarion call, to widen the theoretical lens of LIS inquiry and research, theorists Wayne Wiegand, Gary Radford, Christine Pawley, John Budd, and Douglas Raber have recently contributed important mappings of the ways in which library workers and researchers profit from investigating the works collapsed under the broad category of critical theory.

The growing number of articles addressing critical theory and how it can serve as a basis for reformulating a librarianship of hope, critique and resistance signifies an encouraging shift within LIS research. A revitalized and critical notion of librarianship that stresses the growing importance of interdisciplinary appropriation and theoretical border crossing requires an understanding of the historical and philosophical dimensions of LIS and its evolutionary inclusion within both the micro- and macro-political intersections of capitalist hegemony and the subjective indeterminacies of cultural production. Critical theory as a diagnostic model for addressing traditionally marginalized subjects or those areas of professional practice considered taboo because of their potential for pointing to ruptures and contradictions between what is, what should be and what is often propagated, helps the library profession avoid the pitfalls of status quo thinking and cosmetically de-contextualized services. Many theorists and theories that have not been adequately explored both in library environments and LIS programs pose important questions regarding social relationships, systems, and phenomena that in turn inform the ways in which librarians and libraries function in relation to society as a whole. For example, the work of Marx helps library workers to appreciate the significance of capital, class conflict, ideology and hierarchy both within library institutions and society as a whole. Stuart Hall,

a British cultural theorist who provides librarians with the rationale for expanding their definition of librarianship, has written an array of articles and books detailing the necessity of public intellectuals to provide context and voice to the concerns facing those marginalized people who often find their lives absent from dominant discourses emanating from the homogenized mass media. Jurgen Habermas' critical theory maps the historical trajectory of the public sphere at the same time arguing for a rethinking of the meaning of liberal democracy and the construction of a cohesive system of consensus building and egalitarian communication. Gary Radford has also put forward the argument that not only critical theorists must be integrated within LIS discourse but also those who fall under the always problematic heading of postmodernism, by pointing to the benefits of grasping Michel Foucault's theories of discourse, knowledge, fear, and power when exploring the hidden ways in which libraries mobilize and deploy power asymmetrically in order to legitimate their practices in opposition to dissenting perspectives.<sup>8</sup>

Without oppositional values, pedagogies and epistemologies, librarianship stripped of the critical capacity to appraise itself, appears secure in defining its professional trajectory in accordance with the undemocratic dictates of those commercial values and social relations that obstruct rather than expand the right of library users and non-users to accentuate themselves as critical and engaged citizens capable of materializing the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life rather than as passive and consuming objects left to the dictates of commercial culture and its crass values. Generally speaking, LIS schools have failed to qualitatively address issues central to social justice, economic equality, the increase in privatization of the public sphere, and the growing concentration of media power into a handful of transnational media and telecommunications conglomerates. It is as though those who design LIS programs and curriculums, teach, and develop scholarly research have all but fallen into a duplicitous amnesia often, forgetting that libraries are historical, social, cultural, and economic constructs that shape, reflect, reproduce, and alter the material and psychological lives of users and non-users both positively and often to their detriment. The curricular emphases that contemporary LIS programs have chosen to establish and promote more often than not regard issues of information production, the contestability of knowledge, the deployment of power, and the institutionalization of forms of self-censorship with ambivalence, apathy or limitations. Instead, LIS schools along with the libraries that acquire their intellectual currency from research trends and the intellectual capital of students entering the profession, have given primacy to a curricular agenda that prizes technical efficiency, valorizes technology uncritically, produces information managers rather than humanist librarians, demonizes politics, bleaches history, and detaches librarianship from civic concerns and ethics. When the American Library Association, public library systems across the country, LIS graduate programs, and other mainstream library organizations produce campaigns of rhetoric that claim to address issues of patron exclusion, literacy, civic participation and other issues central to their socializing missions while si-

multaneously advocating political and professional neutrality emptied of any substantial acknowledgement of the deep relationships between capitalism, racism, class conflict, sexism and the wider neoliberal society of violence, punitive action, and unremitting cynicism, one must put forward the question: without actively criticizing and rejecting the very sources, values, and social systems that play a primary role in determining the issues that libraries give lip service to, are libraries serving democracy's promises, marginalized populations and the economically disadvantaged, or simply reproducing a status quo relationship between library principles and the existing realities of social injustice, a morally impoverished economic system, and a politics devoid of democratic meaning, compassion, or social responsibility?

As Christine Pawley has noted,<sup>9</sup> the curricular emphases designed by a growing number of schools of library and information science programs have systematically detached the social and moral character from our practices and policies as library workers; substituting in its place the importance of complying with and reproducing the dominant social, political, and economic formations that function to regulate and legitimate the ideological and material modes of production and consumption of information, knowledge, and meaning. Both Giroux and Pawley astutely read the marketization of curricular emphases of schools of education and library science as a specific example of the ideological and institutional ways in which cultural workers are systematically stripped and de-skilled of their critical capacities to politicize the professional and voice concerns regarding the growing commercialism of the profession.

While it is crucial that librarians learn from the variety of standpoints and discourses that have emerged from a broad and diverse tradition of critical social analysis that connects issues of political economy, the mass media, cultural identity, and the deployment of power to issues central to librarianship and the multiple roles of libraries, library workers acting as public intellectuals must continue to offer their value, knowledge and voice in the struggle to make libraries more ethical and politically conscious while at the same time remaining critical of the intensifying pressure of neoliberal assaults upon the poor, resource depleted, and excluded segments of society. The defense of libraries as a vital and meaningful public sphere requires not only an ethical-political attention to the ways in which consumerism and commercial power are aggressively mobilized in opposition to public culture and sites where democratic possibilities take root, but also there must exist a substantial effort to re-conceptualize librarianship to include deeper levels of social responsibility that offer more than reproducing the worn out language of liberalism and political neutrality. It can no longer be argued that a majority of library schools take seriously the issues of social justice, poverty, forms of patron exclusion, and the growing popularization of depoliticized, corporate style management formulas appropriated as guided templates for operating library institutions.

### *Conclusion*

While there are certainly dedicated librarians, researchers, organizations, and other library workers who openly recognize the shortcomings and long-term problems associated with a profession that is rapidly becoming a hollowed out reification of consumer society, there continues to exist a tremendous need for the kind of professional reflection that goes beyond the limits of librarianship's unproblematized practices and essentialized discourses. The opportunity to embrace discourses, perspectives, and standpoints that raise salient questions about librarianship and the role of libraries in promoting and expanding the rationalization of neoliberalism and its bare knuckles approach to suppressing public goods, should not be quickly dismissed or thought of as an affected exercise in the promotion of eclecticism for the sake of multiplicity. Instead, the value of critical theory, cultural studies, and particular strands of postmodernism as diagnostic tools for understanding the central constituents that comprise social realities, structures, contingencies, and phenomena, draws from their theoretical power to provide frameworks that expand and broaden our ways of seeing and understanding of librarianship's connection with issues related to capitalism, culture, ideology, power, and information technologies. Critical theory can help us to realign a more focused eye upon professional habits, institutional cultures, and exclusionary practices that have become inscribed within normative structures and value systems. Library centered contexts that directly correlate to various forms of economic exploitation, social exclusion and cultural marginalization are better understood and altered when as a profession, librarianship is open to modes of self-critique and alternative ways of thinking. Sadly, traditional LIS theory has long denied the utility of critical theory both on account of the political implications of its use and because of its endorsement by those concerned with anti-capitalist, liberatory struggles.

Following the advice of Wayne Wiegand<sup>10</sup> and Douglas Raber,<sup>11</sup> who have argued that the professional tunnel vision and blind spots plaguing the dominant LIS discourses and organizational rhetoric could better be re-conceptualized by appropriating the insights derived from critical, Marxist and post-modern theorists, the imperative to make the work of thinkers like Giroux more prominent within LIS curricular literature must not be viewed as an exercise in philosophical navel gazing or an insular discourse abstracted from a politics of material transformation and empowerment, but rather as a connection to an interventionist and practical politics of everyday that is passionate, curious, self reflexive, and admittedly aware of the limitations of its inquiry and problematizes its authority. The value in examining the texts of critical theorists like Giroux is centered around the belief that a richer, more nuanced and multi-perspective means of reading the complexity and dynamic nature of society and library work is necessary not only for the purpose of extending knowledge but to then mobilize and transform theory from its abstract and institutional life into concrete ways of everyday practice and being. What I am suggesting here is to hold libraries and LIS schools respon-

sible for living up to their rhetoric as institutions concerned with democracy, human emancipation, intellectual freedom and quality living standards in a way that reinforces the political, moral and civic role of libraries as more than institutions aimed at preserving the interests and legitimacy of class, commerce and professional stagnation.

*Works Cited and Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> Giroux, Henry A. *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 43.
- <sup>2</sup> See Henry A. Giroux's description of his professional focus and academic interests at: "About Henry A. Giroux, Ph. D." <http://www.vms.utexas.edu/~possible/giroux.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Henry Giroux, like other Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers, has been influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci and his concept of the organic intellectual.
- <sup>4</sup> Lawrence Grossberg quoted on the acknowledgement page of *Between Borders*. New York: Routledge, 1994, ed. Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren.
- <sup>5</sup> Giroux, Henry A. (2002). "Youth and the Politics of Domestic Terrorism," *Tikkun*, v. 17, Issue 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Radford, Gary (2002). "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots," available from <http://alpha.fdu.edu/~gradford/wiegand.html>
- <sup>9</sup> Pawley, Christine (1998). "Hegemony's Handmaid? The Library and Information Studies Curriculum From a Class Perspective," *The Library Quarterly*, v. 68, Number 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Wiegand, Wayne (1999). "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us About the Present; Reflections on the Twentieth Century History of American Librarianship," *The Library Quarterly*, v. 69, Number 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Raber, Douglas (2003). "Librarians as Organic Intellectuals: A Gramscian Approach to Blind Spots and Tunnel Vision," *The Library Quarterly*, v. 73, Number 1.