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On Critical Pedagogy (2nd Edition): A Book Review Symposium

On Critical Pedagogy: 2nd Edition, 2020, authored by Henry A. Giroux, Bloomsbury Academic ISBN 978-1-3501-4497-2

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In these essays, Henry Giroux makes an impassioned call for a critical understanding of education.† Eschewing conceptions of teaching as a ‘disinterested method’ free of politics, he suggests instead that educators and cultural workers, as public intellectuals, should view their practices as entailing the responsibility to nurture an ‘educated hope’ among learners (p.140). This critical pedagogy, which makes both the ‘political more pedagogical and the pedagogical more political’ (p.143), is conceived, after Raymond Williams, as a mode of ‘permanent education’ that extends beyond formal schooling (p.156). With eloquent outrage, Giroux recounts the injustices of the racialised and gendered forms of oppression and class-based exploitation that underwrite the ‘hidden curriculum’ in public and higher education. His more recent essays explore, in the North American context, the proliferation of not-so-hidden forms of penal and militarised social control that have arisen in the wake of state policies of deregulation and privatisation.

Giroux describes the unrelenting assault of market forces on the lives of marginalised youth and those groups deemed ‘disposable’ by the de-humanising calculus of the neoliberal economy in the US. He dissects the logics of punishment and structural racism that have proliferated under the auspices of both Democratic and Republican administrations. Beneath this bleak tableau, Giroux affirms the possibility of resistance to the erosion of democratic public spheres. He identifies education, both in a formal and in a broader sense, as a key site of struggle, where students can imagine transformative new languages to contest these forms of domination, enabling them ‘to think and act differently’ (p.14). Through the development of an ‘oppositional utopianism’ (p.141), Giroux makes the case that educators and cultural workers, in the classroom, the university, and beyond, can empower citizens to construct and sustain participatory and substantive democratic societies.

Well-known concepts of the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci feature prominently among the theoretical resources mobilised by Giroux for this project. Giroux employs a range of keywords drawn from a Gramscian lexicon, including the notions of hegemony, subalternity, common sense, consent, organic intellectuals, and civil society. He makes significant reference to Gramsci’s insight that ‘every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship’ (p.55; See Gramsci, 1971, p.350). This thought informs Giroux’s perspective, which explores ‘the connection between democracy, political agency and pedagogy’ (p.162), by combining Gramsci’s ideas with those of other thinkers, such as Williams, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Zygmunt Bauman.

In chapter two, Giroux takes issue with the appropriation of Gramsci’s pedagogical ideas by conservative writers, in particular Harold Entwistle and E.D. Hirsch. Giroux argues that Entwistle and Hirsch take Gramsci’s views out of context and distort them for their own purposes, namely to justify a return to forms of rote learning and standardised curricula, thereby reinforcing a deference to authority among students. The origins of this conservative reading lie in Gramsci’s polemical response

to the 1923 educational reform act in Italy named after neoidealist philosopher and fascist Giovanni Gentile. Gramsci's criticisms of the Gentile reforms in his *Prison Notebooks*, and by extension of their provenance in the ideas of liberal idealist Benedetto Croce, are an attempt to disentangle the reforms' rhetoric, endorsing a superficial notion of 'active education', from their reality, which deprived subaltern and peasant populations of core literacy and communication skills necessary to challenge Mussolini's regime.

Giroux seeks to reclaim Gramsci's legacy from such uses that run contrary to the 'critical and emancipatory possibilities' of his wider political project (p.67). Gramsci's reflections on the theme of education certainly highlight the discipline required for intellectuals emerging from subaltern positions to acquire the skills of grammar and logic necessary to develop an effective and autonomous critical thought. However, Giroux reminds us that Gramsci's emphasis on learning as work aims to raise the general cultural level of the population, rather than to entrench a hierarchical social order. In this sense, Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', the renewal of Marxism and of philosophy itself with the aim of 'renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' (Gramsci, 1971, p.331, p.464), resonates with critical pedagogy's emphasis on the intimate relation between self-change and social transformation, and between 'knowledge production' and 'self-production' (p.143).

While Giroux is correct to reassert the 'critical' spirit of Gramsci's project against conservative readings, revisiting the complex and variegated meanings that emerge from Gramsci's writings could enrich Giroux's own use of Gramscian concepts. For example, Giroux treats 'common sense' – the taken for granted beliefs and practices of each social stratum that, while continually in flux, both reinforce and are engendered by a particular order – primarily in the pejorative connotation of a struggle against its conformist inertia. Giroux emphasises the project of 'unsettling' common sense (p.133), referring less to the immanent role of 'common sense' in the creation of a 'new conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971, p.465). For Gramsci, the 'critical' project to supersede 'common sense' must itself become a more coherent 'common sense', or, in other terms, a critically aware 'good sense' (see Liguori, 2016, Ch.6; Crehan, 2016, Ch.3). While Giroux does not claim to employ concepts in a strictly Gramscian manner, this constructive aspect of 'common sense', arguably dominant in the *Notebooks*, could complement Giroux's use of the term, as it allows Gramsci to contend with the persistently ideological status of alternatives that replace the status quo. Despite Alistair Davidson's argument that the issue of 'how good sense is created out of common sense' is under-theorised by Gramsci himself (Davidson, 2008, p.78), the *Prison Notebooks* continue to have much to offer Giroux's productive synthesis of Gramscian concepts with more recent critical theories.

Giroux's foundational contribution to critical pedagogy, understood as consciousness-raising (thinking differently) as a means to foment personal and social transformation (acting differently), suggests the potential for substantial dialogue with resources that have emerged from the recent season of Gramsci studies (e.g. Liguori, 2015; Cospito, 2016; Meta, 2019). This exchange could present further means to mediate between the agents of emancipatory social change and the circumstances confronting them, and to avoid the 'subjective' aspect of the critical project of overcoming 'common sense' (the 'optimism of the will', if you like) becoming separated from the 'objective' analysis of the relations of forces (the realist 'pessimism of the intellect'). Gramsci's study of the history of intellectuals (organic and traditional) provides a rich account of their mediating role as organisers on the cultural terrain (with enduring significance for educators). Gramsci develops the concrete determinations of this mediation through his creative rereading of Machiavelli's politics and the figure of the 'modern Prince'. As Peter Thomas has shown, this is not simply a code word for an existing political party, but for 'the fusion of a new type of political party and oppositional culture that would gather together intellectuals (organisers) and the masses in a new political and intellectual practice'

(Thomas, 2009, p.437). Thus, Gramsci situates the emancipatory transformation of 'common sense' in a struggle between competing hegemonies. The constructive aspect of 'common sense' reflects the fact that there is no immediately non-ideological vantage point 'outside' of this terrain of struggles.

A key resource for explaining the recalcitrance of our times to Utopian projects, of the type that Giroux proposes, is Gramsci's analytically fertile politico-historical understanding of 'passive revolution'. Recent publications (e.g. Mayo, 2015; Pizzolato and Holst, 2017) have alluded to the potential for critical pedagogy to engage with Gramsci's conception of 'passive revolution'. This concept explains the ongoing capacity of ruling class hegemony, despite recurrent crises, to disaggregate subaltern initiatives and to absorb and deflect subversive energies that challenge the existing social order. Gramsci develops this notion of 'passive revolution' from his account of the *Risorgimento* and of fascism in Italy. Gramsci's reflections on these ongoing molecular processes that (re-)constitute subaltern groups as passive have great explanatory power for those facing the 'morbid symptoms' of the twenty-first century. I would argue that following the trajectory of this analysis today might help us to discern the most deep-seated obstacles to the reception and effectivity of critical pedagogy's oppositional project.

Gramsci's analysis thus allows us to examine Giroux's assertion, in this new edition of his text, that the United States under Trump is a form of 'neoliberal fascism' (p.225). Giroux argues that neoliberalism creates the conditions for a new fascist politics while also being 'intrinsically fascist' itself (p.199). While he conceives fascism as characterised by various aspects – as emerging from nihilism and despair, as breeding cynicism, as part of an anti-democratic turn, involving, following Arendt, a 'fear of judging' –, Giroux's characterisation hinges on the concepts of 'illiteracy' and 'ignorance'. On the one hand, ignorance is no longer a simple 'lack of knowledge', it is rather a Lacanian 'passion for ignorance' and 'refusal to know' (p.94), becoming 'the primary organizing principle of American society' (p.200). On the other, illiteracy takes on an active and manufactured form, as a 'war' against 'language, meaning, thinking, and the capacity for critical thought' (p.200), corresponding to the new forms of right-wing populism and authoritarianism that have proliferated in the digital era.

Giroux provides valuable descriptions of the consequences of the neoliberal politics of the extreme 'centre' (Ali, 2015), which 'has produced immense misfortune through its elevation of a savage capitalism to a national ideal that governs not only the market but all of social life' (p.248). However, as Christian Fuchs argues in his review of Giroux's *Terror of the Unforeseen*, 'the existence of political leaders with fascist characters, even if they communicate fascist ideology, does not automatically imply the existence of a fascist society' (Fuchs, 2019). For Fuchs, in order for 'a fascist society to come into existence, these leaders need to call forth collective political practices that result in the full institutionalization of authoritarianism' (ibid.). While the sharpening contradictions of the decomposing neoliberal order are a reminder that fascism is not a phenomenon confined to the past, as recent analyses have shown (Palheta, 2018), Giroux oversteps the mark in suggesting that such tendencies within neoliberalism's crisis mark the necessary advent of a fascist society. Nevertheless, his insightful account of the logic of despair animating contemporary US society reveals much of value about the dark consequences of the neoliberal mentality.

Gramsci's reflections on 'passive revolution' and the molecular changes in Italian society that led to the emergence of fascism offer a line of research that can illuminate further these troubling developments in our own times. They link the struggle between hegemonies to an understanding of the integral role played by education in hegemonic relationships. Giroux's early mobilisation of Gramscian concepts in the service of a radical critical pedagogy helped to open a Gramscian pathway in critical education studies. Giroux demonstrates that revisiting Gramsci's thought, in dialogue with more recent critical thinkers, can articulate the coordinates of the 'reciprocal siege' at work in the field

of education, between the forms of domination undermining the democratic promise of public and higher education, and the transformative praxis nurtured by critical pedagogy. Deepening this engagement with Gramsci today, by pursuing this interaction between Gramsci studies and pedagogical thought, offers the potential, I would argue, of articulating the catalysing fusion between the 'educated hope' (p.140) pioneered by Giroux and the movements among subaltern groups towards a more critically aware 'common sense'.

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