

BOOK REVIEW

HENRY GIROUX. *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the assault on teachers, students, and public education (Counterpoints: Studies in the postmodern theory of education, vol. 400)*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. (2012). 129 pp. \$29.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-1-4331-1216-4).

Introduction from a course instructor, Mariusz Galczynski

In designing a professional seminar course for McGill University's Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning (MATL) program, a path towards Quebec teacher certification for professionals with undergraduate degrees in curriculum-relevant areas, I was challenged with the task of selecting a course text that would encourage my students to reflect on teaching as a profession in provincial, national, and global contexts, both historically and presently. Having just finished and been inspired by Henry Giroux's *Education and Crisis of Public Values*, I decided to make the text required reading for our dialogue-based course.

As both a current education researcher and former secondary school teacher in the United States, I felt that no other book I read had so directly and urgently depicted the plight of teachers in North America under the pressures of assessment, accountability, and privatization. Granted, the text focuses entirely on the US education system and serves as a call to action for US teachers and policymakers, but it is authored by a scholar who has been based in Canada for the last decade and who, at least subconsciously, offers precautionary admonition for the Canadian system. Still, Giroux's rhetorical approach across the book's eight chapters—with titles like "In Defense of Public School Teachers in a Time of Crisis" and "Dumbing Down Teachers: Attacking Colleges of Education in the Name of Reform"—is decidedly American, echoing the aggressive style of outspoken US political figures like Chris Christie or Michelle Rhee. While such language, atypical in academia, might be galvanizing to those already aligned with Giroux's cause, the question is whether it could be at all effective in swaying those positioned against teachers and teacher unions. Admittedly, Giroux's arguments begin to sound redundant as you read from cover to cover, but it is difficult to deny the text's overall effectiveness as a conversation starter.

Surely, liberal voices like Giroux's deserve greater exposure in the debate over education, if only to counter against the unchallenged attacks on education carried out by deficit-model reformers who ceaselessly label public schools as "failing" and vilify schoolteachers—and whose discourses are so well aligned with the fear tactics cherished by US media. At the same time, what does Giroux actually accomplish in representing the opposite extreme? To help answer this question, I asked two of the MATL students (and preservice teachers) enrolled in my course to weigh in with their own opinions of his book; their contrasting reviews follow.

An endorsement from Nicholas Rafael

Henry Giroux's *Education and the Crisis of Public Values* is an exceptional, politically charged manifesto that invigorates new teachers in their quest to educate young minds. Giroux advocates for a moralistic approach to connect public schools and teachers while rightfully criticizing the growing capitalist government trends that seek to repackage institutions of learning as marketable and profitable entities. As a graduate student in university, striving to make way in the teaching profession, I consider Giroux's book as instrumental in helping teachers realize the importance of public school teaching and in generating an awareness of the possible dark clouds that may be looming on the future of public school education. Although the author's technical writing is quite assertive in driving home his point that there is a need to worry about the students of future generations, who might be forced to choose between costly private schools and lower quality public ones, it is important to realize that this is a legitimate cause for concern. Giroux's writing is both highly philosophical and political; his arguments are direct, pointed, and sometimes seem quite harsh, yet they are essential for teachers to be aware of.

Giroux's book relates significantly to other landmark educational texts such as Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Like Freire, Giroux offers a socio-cultural criticism that engages readers and illuminates many of the hidden agendas of government education policies, particularly by demonstrating the effects of undermining public schools. Giroux's contribution to the field of education is essential as a clarification for the sometimes dubious decisions that governments make in regards to private and public educational institutions. Whereas proponents of critical pedagogy may be biased, Giroux's commentary on the educational system is highly valuable, even to students and teachers with neutral or opposing views.

The reality of the matter is that there has indeed been a big shift in the way our educational system is being governed. More and more students are switching from public school to private schools, with the government helping this process along. Although it is quite sad to see numbers drop when on the ground floor, as teachers' public school employment rates are dropping excruciatingly quickly, it is the students who will be most affected—especially

those who have no way to afford private school fees but who still deserve a quality education. Critical pedagogy is therefore essential in order to make students and teachers aware of what is happening, so that they can try to make a difference. All new teachers in university education programs should thus be reading Giroux's text, along with pieces of Freire's work, in order to grasp the potential of education to challenge the capitalist ideals of government and to create positive change.

A critique from Stefani Balinsky

Giroux is a powerful writer and very convincing in support of his arguments for education and political reform. He takes an aggressive view of the US political, economic, and educational climate and lashes out at the neo-liberal policies that de-skill teachers and fail to educate minorities and the poor. His is a uniquely US perspective, and Giroux has made a successful career out of his call for rebellion and revolution. However, as a textbook in a graduate studies course, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values* should be read carefully, considering both its pedagogical and commercial aspirations and maintaining a sensitivity to the culture it describes.

If the Canadian education system eventually follows the US one, then Giroux's book is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of educating people according to business and self-interests. As a textbook, however, it does not offer such international perspective, and thus requires the professor to deconstruct the book with students and conspicuously point out the differences in the Canadian education system. Moreover, using this book for informed discussion presupposes that students have teaching or administrative experience. In my opinion, Giroux's text is better suited for advanced classes examining policymaking, educational leadership, and critical praxis. Establishing the tenuous connections between what Giroux observes and the Canadian context requires a familiarity with philosophy of education, professional experience, and an awareness of the missions and standpoints of provincial education ministries.

Aside from its concentration on the US system, the book's weakness is its organization and pacing. Giroux waits until the final chapter to mention Paolo Freire's work on critical pedagogy, theory that clearly influences his own point of view. In a book of just over one hundred pages in length, the author reserves his most reflective arguments for the last eight. To be fair, Giroux's book is not a textbook and should not be compared to one. The book does incite debate between opposing political beliefs and can quickly turn class discussion in to an examination of the USA's value system—but this is not the purpose of most graduate courses in education, at least not in Canada.

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REFERENCES

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.