

Henry Giroux: Rethinking the Promise of Critical Education Under an Obama Regime

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Academic Chronis Polychroniou interviews Henry Giroux, a professor in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University.

Chronis Polychroniou: I'd like to begin by asking you to give us a brief account of your conceptualization and understanding of education.

In the most general sense, I understand education as a moral and political practice whose purpose is not only to introduce students to the great reservoir of diverse intellectual ideas and traditions, but also to engage those inherited bodies of knowledge through critical dialogue, analysis and comprehension. At the same time, education is a set of social experiences and an ethical space through which it becomes possible to rethink what Jacques Derrida once called the concepts of the "possible and the impossible," and to enable what Jacques Rancière calls loosening the coordinates of the sensible through a constant reexamination of the boundaries that distinguish the sensible from the subversive. Both theorists are concerned with how the boundaries of knowledge and everyday life are constructed in ways that seem unquestionable, making it necessary not only to interrogate commonsense assumptions, but also to ask what it means to question such assumptions and see beyond them. As a political and moral practice, education always presupposes a vision of the future in its introduction to, preparation for and legitimization of particular forms of social life, demanding answers to the questions of whose future is affected by these forms. For what ends and to what purposes do they endure?

What separates an authoritarian from an emancipatory notion of education is whether or not education encourages and enables students to deepen their commitments to social justice, equality and individual and social autonomy, while at the same time expanding their capacities to assume public responsibility and actively participate in the very process of governing. As a condition of individual and social autonomy, education introduces democracy to students as a way of life - an ethical ideal that demands constant attention - and, as such, takes seriously the responsibility for providing the conditions for people to exercise critical judgment, reflexiveness, deliberation and socially responsible action.

Education is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency. As a political project, education should illuminate the relationships among knowledge, authority and power. It should also draw attention to questions concerning who has control over the production of knowledge, values and skills, and it should illuminate how knowledge, identities and authority are constructed within particular sets of social relations. In my view, education is a deliberate attempt on the part of educators to influence how and what knowledge and subjectivities are produced within particular sets of social relations.

Ethically, education stresses the importance of understanding what actually happens in classrooms and other educational settings by raising questions regarding what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction should one desire and what does it mean to know something. Most importantly, education should take seriously what it means to understand the

relationship between how we learn and how we act as individual and social agents; that is, it should be concerned with teaching students not only how to think, but how to come to grips with a sense of their own individual and social responsibility and to be responsible for their actions as part of a broader attempt to be engaged citizens, who can participate in Democratic public life.

Finally, what has to be acknowledged is that critical education is not about an a priori method that can simply be applied regardless of context. It is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of the community ties, available resources and the histories that students bring with them to the classroom, as well as the diverse experiences and identities they inhabit. I would like to conceptualize education as a form of provocation and challenge, a practice rooted in an ethical-political vision that attempts to take people beyond the world they already know in a way that does not insist on a fixed set of altered meanings, but instead provokes an expansion of the range of human possibilities and provides the conditions for the development of an informed, critical citizenry capable of actively participating and governing in a Democratic society. This suggests forms of knowledge and pedagogy that enable rather than subvert the potential of a Democratic culture.

Chronis Polychroniou: In describing the role you envision yourself as playing for students, one commentator of your work has written that your classes "are comparable to Bob Dylan's first electric outing at the Newport Folk Festival, where Dylan not only provoked the traditionalists and reformists alike by going electric, but also disturbed them." That's a great compliment and a perfect elaboration of the role of the true teacher. What are the challenges you face as an educator in viewing the classroom as a space of dialogue, critical investigation and interpretation?

It is worth noting that the challenges we face as educators in the classroom are intricately related to larger issues impacting higher education. While recognizing that higher education inhabits a diverse and complex landscape, I do think it is fair to say that in the United States, higher education faces a number of challenges in terms of its overall purpose: how it defines the role of faculty and students, and how it determines the meaning of pedagogy itself. Simply put, higher education appears to be suffering from both a crisis of politics and a crisis of legitimacy. Politically, higher education is increasingly being influenced by larger economic, military and ideological forces that consistently attempt to narrow its purview as a Democratic public sphere.

In economic terms, higher education is increasingly subjected to a neoliberal disciplinary apparatus of power and a regime of market values that put structures of governance largely into the hands and interests of an administrative-managerial elite. Under this disciplinary apparatus, the calculating logic of cost-benefit analyses prioritizes instrumental knowledge, the discourse of efficiency and the accumulation of capital. This means that it becomes more difficult for educators to have any control over the production of their own academic labor. Moreover, under the leadership of these university CEOs, academic disciplines, teaching and research are valued primarily in terms of market outcomes and measurable standards. Under such conditions, the most valued academic subjects are those that have a certain exchange value in the market, enabling students to shore up their credentials for jobs. In a world in which youth have been unearthed not simply as another expansive and profitable market, but as the primary source of redemption for the future of capitalism, many young people are now constructed as consuming and salable objects. They often come to the university with no language for defining themselves or citizenship itself outside of the demands of a consumerist

society, making it all the more difficult for them to challenge the university as an adjunct of corporate values and interests. This means that those of us teaching in the humanities not only inhabit classrooms with dwindling resources, but increasingly face students who do not value knowledge that does not immediately translate into a job opportunity or seems at odds with simple translations offered by an utterly commodified popular culture. Moreover, as the humanities and liberal arts are increasingly relegated to an ornamental function within the university, faculty are teaching more courses; new hires are put on part-time tracks; and the increased workload makes it more difficult to teach effectively.

Another obstacle to quality teaching and research lies in the fact that the increasing loss of public funding is pushing more universities to align themselves with the national security state, which then faithfully rewards them with billions of dollars in research funds largely dedicated to militarizing knowledge and providing the deadly weapons needed by an ever-expanding warfare state. As a result, faculty find themselves locked into an academic world dominated by military and corporate values, engaging in pedagogical practices that more closely approximate training students than educating them, and being rewarded less for their scholarship and teaching than for their ability to secure outside funding. In this instance, there is an ongoing transformation among faculty in which they become deskilled as intellectuals, reduced to the status of academic entrepreneurs and functioning as unquestioning employees of the military-industrial-academic complex.

There are also additional forces at work in the undermining of the Democratic ethos of higher education. These include very powerful right-wing, corporate-financed groups and foundations in the United States that are waging a battle to eliminate any vestige of critical education from the classroom on the grounds that such teaching is either propagandistic or unpatriotic. All of these groups view the university either as an adjunct to the corporation and security state or as a citadel of patriotic correctness, or, even worse, as all three of these things. Under such conditions, not only does the university default on its role as a Democratic public sphere, but it also suppresses dissent, critical thought and the pedagogical conditions necessary for students to become critically engaged actors. In a similar manner, public intellectuals are now replaced by privatized intellectuals, often working in secrecy, conducting research that serves either the warfare state or the corporate state, and feeling too intimidated to engage in critical teaching. Under such circumstances, the accelerating process of deskilling teachers undercuts the possibility of critical dialogue, the development of a culture of questioning, and the desire of educators to challenge and provoke students beyond the world they already know in a way that does not insist on a fixed set of meanings.

Intellectuals, no longer positioned in a vibrant relationship to public life, now labor under the influence of managerial modes of governance and market values that mimic the logic of Wall Street. Consequently, higher education appears increasingly decoupled from its historical legacy as a crucial public sphere, responsible for both educating students for the workplace and providing them with the modes of critical discourse, interpretation, judgment, imagination and experiences that deepen and expand democracy. Unable to legitimate its purpose and meaning according to such important Democratic practices and principles, higher education now narrates itself in terms that are more instrumental, commercial and practical, having a detrimental impact on the classroom. As universities adopt the ideology of transnational corporations and become subordinated to the needs of capital, the war industries and the Pentagon, they become less concerned with how they might educate students regarding the ideology and civic practices of Democratic governance and the particular necessity of using knowledge to address the challenges of public life. Higher education

instead functions as part of the post-9/11 military-industrial-academic complex, becoming increasingly conjoined with military interests and market values, identities and social relations, while John Dewey's once-vaunted claim that "democracy needs to be reborn in each generation, and education is its midwife" is either willfully ignored, forgotten or becomes an object of scorn. Education now seems to be measured by the degree to which it can escape any vestige of political, ethical and moral responsibility.

Chronis Polychroniou: Violence and social anomie are widespread problems in America's public school system and in many other public school systems in the Western world. In fact, these types of behavior seem in our own times to cross class lines and to form a distinctive display of aggressive behavior that is very much ingrained in the overall culture of Western society. Under these conditions, what can school administrators and teachers do to construct a learning environment that is geared to self-development, respect for others and responsibility for one's actions, and form social bonds around the values of democracy, freedom and civic virtue?

Learning environments cannot be removed from the larger political, economic and social forces that shape them. If education is going to be responsive to the larger problems that erupt in its classrooms, it has to become a force for addressing the deepest conflicts of our time, and this not only means reclaiming the university as a Democratic public sphere, but also putting in place those pedagogical conditions that make knowledge meaningful in order for it to become critical and transformative. For knowledge to become meaningful, it must connect with the histories, values and understandings that shape students' everyday lives. This is knowledge that not only tries to connect with what students already know, but also challenges the limits of such knowledge by questioning both the histories and context in which such knowledge is produced, appropriated and internalized. Pedagogy in this instance takes matters of context seriously, but does not limit its articulation of knowledge to the immediacy of experience; rather, experiential contexts become a starting point for moving into the larger world of knowledge, ideas, theories and social relations.

This kind of education also suggests making visible the values, ideologies and practices that enable violence towards others, promote an indifference to social justice and intensify the disdain for democracy through ongoing attack on civil liberties, the widening forces of economic inequality and increasing incarceration of young people of color. Such values and practices have to be engaged as part of a language of critique, while a discourse of educated hope has to be appropriated as part of a broader effort to reclaim those modes of agency that expand and deepen the values and practices of a substantive democracy. Hope in this instance attempts to show "how the space of the possible is larger than the one assigned - that something else is possible, but not that everything is possible."

We live at a time when Democratic values are subordinated to market values; public life collapses into private concerns; and a rabid social Darwinism militates against any notion of social responsibility. Reality TV's mantra of a world in which everybody is voted off the island is now mimicked in higher education with its own neoliberal mantra of privatize or perish. Yet, higher education may be one of the few sites left where students can learn to recognize and fight against such anti-Democratic tendencies. At the very least, educators have to be attentive to the ways in which corporate and right-wing ideologies and pedagogical practices deny the Democratic purposes of education and undermine the possibility of a critical citizenry. Such a critique on its own, while important, is not enough. Academics also have a responsibility to make clear higher education's association with other memories,

brought back to life in the 1960s when the academy was remembered for its public role in developing citizenship and social awareness - a role that shaped and overrode its economic function. Such memories, however uncomfortable to the new corporate managers of higher education, must be nurtured and developed in defense of higher education as an important site of both critical thought and democratization.

Instead of a narrative of decline, educators need to combine a discourse of critique and resistance with a discourse of possibility and hope. Such optimism can both recall and seek to reclaim consciousness of the public and Democratic role of higher education, which raises fundamental questions about how knowledge can be emancipatory and how an education for democracy can be both desirable and possible. Memories of educational resistance and hope suggest more than the usual academic talk about shattering the boundaries that separate academic disciplines or making connections to students' lives, however important these considerations might be. There is also, as Stuart Hall points out, the urgent need for educators to provide students with "Critical knowledge [that is] ahead of traditional knowledge ... better than anything that traditional knowledge can produce, because only serious ideas are going to stand up."

Moreover, there is also the need to recognize "the social limits of academic knowledge. Critical intellectual work cannot be limited to the university, but must constantly look for ways of making that knowledge available to wider social forces." If Hall is right, and I think he is, educators have a pedagogical responsibility to make knowledge meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative. But such knowledge should be more than a provocation that takes students beyond the world they already know; it should also expand the range of human possibilities by connecting what students know and how they come to know to how they respond to the world. Critical education should instill in students both what Zygmunt Bauman calls "a disgust for all forms of socially produced injustice" and the desire to make the world different from what it is. In part, this means educating students to believe that democracy mandates not only a responsibility to the plight of others and a critical awareness of the ethical demands of our own sense of agency, but also a heightened recognition of the obligations of citizenship and the need to keep Democratic politics alive through an ongoing and active individual and collective intervention in public life.

While Hannah Arendt did not address directly the importance of critical pedagogy, she understood that in its absence monstrous deeds, often committed on a gigantic scale, had less to do with some grand notion of evil than with a "quite authentic inability to think." For Arendt, the absence of a capacity for thinking, making judgments and assuming responsibility constituted the conditions not merely for stupidity, but for a type of evil that could produce monstrous crimes and a politics exemplified in old and new forms of totalitarianism. The current corporate and right-wing assault on higher education is in reality an attack on the most rudimentary conditions of Democratic politics. Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, curious, reflective and independent - qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform and governmental policy in their own country and around the globe. This means educators both in and outside of the university need to reassert pedagogy as the cornerstone of democracy by demonstrating in our classrooms and to the broader public that it provides the very foundation for students to learn not merely how to be governed, but also how to be capable of governing.

Of course, there are also structural issues that must be addressed. Governments must be willing to fund education as a central responsibility of the Democratic state. Educators must work under conditions marked by Democratic modes of governance, which needs to include adequate resources, decent salaries and full-time positions protected by the principles of academic freedom. In addition, students must be given access to education as a right, not merely as an entitlement. In other words, the ability to pursue education should be limited neither by class position nor social status.

Chronis Polychroniou: While problems differ from country to country, there is a general consensus that higher education is in a crisis. Declining quality, rising costs, loss of academic community, gradual retreat from the mission of educating students to think critically, creatively and responsibly about their role as citizens in a Democratic polity represent only a few of the pieces of the higher education puzzle today. Educators worldwide are putting the blame squarely on the adoption of market-based understandings of education, the commercialization of research and the corporatization of the university. Would you comment on the above?

I don't think there is any question that the neoliberal reconstruction of higher education has reached alarming heights in many countries, but we would be remiss not to recognize that there are other dangerous forces attempting to shape the university in ways that undermine its promise as a Democratic public sphere. For instance, while there has been an increasing concern among academics and progressives over the growing corporatization of the university, the transformation of academia into a militarized knowledge factory has been largely ignored as a subject of major concern and critical debate. Such silence has nothing to do with a lack of visibility regarding the shift toward militarization taking place in higher education.

Attempts to inject a military and security presence into American universities certainly have not been covert. Not only is the militarization of higher education made obvious by the presence of over 150 military-educational institutions in the United States designed to train a youthful corps of tomorrow's officers in the strategies, values, skills and knowledge of the warfare state; it is also evident, as the American Association of Universities points out, in the existence of hundreds of colleges and universities that conduct Pentagon-funded research, provide classes to military personnel and design programs specifically for future employment with various departments and agencies associated with the warfare state. After decades of underfunding, especially within the humanities, faculty are lured to the Department of Defense, the Pentagon, and various intelligence agencies either to procure government jobs or to apply for grants to support individual research in the service of the national security state, which in turn provides backing for the US government's commitment to global military supremacy. Military-oriented research programs and knowledge are now being funded to produce new and innovative ways to fight wars, develop sophisticated surveillance technologies and produce new military weapons. Based on the assumption that weapons of destruction, surveillance and death insure freedom and security, such research not only displaces compelling environmental, health and life-sustaining projects in the interests of military priorities, but is also antithetical to fostering a culture of public disclosure, transparency, questioning, dialogue and exchange, all of which are central to the university as a Democratic public sphere.

Similarly, the 16 intelligence agencies in the United States are using higher education to train potential spies or other national security operatives, often under the cloak of secrecy. In

such cases, the fundamental principles of public accountability, academic freedom and open debate are either compromised or severely endangered. Moreover, an increasing number of colleges and universities are trying to attract Pentagon money by jumping into the market for online and distance learning programs, often altering their curricula and delivery services to attract part of the lucrative education market for military personnel. The rush to cash in on such changes has been dramatic, particularly for private, online educational institutions. What I think is problematic is both the nature of these programs and the wider culture of privatization and militarization legitimated by them. With respect to the former, the incursion of the military presence in higher education furthers and deepens the ongoing privatization of education and knowledge itself. Most of the players in this market are for-profit institutions that are problematic not only for the quality of education they offer, but also for their aggressive support of education less as a public good than as a private initiative and salable commodity. And as this sector of higher education grows, it will become not only more privatized, but also more instrumentalized, reducing the university to a credentializing factory designed to serve the needs of the military and coming closer to falling into the trap of confusing training with a broad-based education. Catering to the educational needs of the military makes it all the more difficult to offer educational programs that would challenge militarized notions of identity, knowledge, values, ideas, social relations and visions.

At a time when civil liberties are under attack, intelligence agencies are illegally engaged in data mining, the separation of powers is increasingly undermined by an imperial presidency and the CIA abducts people who then "disappear" into the torture chambers of authoritarian regimes, it is all the more imperative that higher education educate students to consider the consequences of the creeping militarization of American society. In addition, military institutions radiate power in their communities and often resemble updated versions of the old company towns of 19th century America - inhospitable to dissent, cultural differences, people who take risks and any discourse that might question authority. What all of this suggests is that the sheer power of the military apparatus, further augmented by its corporate and political alliances and fueled by an enormous budget, provides military-oriented institutions with a powerful arm-twisting ability capable of shaping research agendas, imposing military values, normalizing militarized knowledge as a fact of daily life, supporting military solutions to a range of diverse problems and bending higher education and individual researchers to its will, an ominous and largely ignored disaster that is in the making in the United States.

Another threat that the university now faces comes from a newly reinvigorated war that is currently being waged by Christian nationalists, reactionary neoconservatives and right-wing political ideologues against all of those independent institutions that foster social responsibility, critical thought and critical citizenship. And there is more at work in this current attack than the rampant anti-intellectualism and paranoid style of American politics outlined in Richard Hofstadter's "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life," written over 40 years ago. There is also the collective power of radical right-wing organizations, which, in spite of a Democratically controlled Congress, continue to have a powerful influence on all levels of government and feel compelled to dismantle the open, questioning cultures of the academy. While the attack on dissent is being waged on numerous fronts, higher education in the United States seems to be the primary target of several right-wing forces that are waging an aggressive and focused campaign against the principles of academic freedom, and seem more than willing to sacrifice critical pedagogical practice in the name of patriotic correctness. Ironically, it is through the vocabulary of individual rights, academic freedom, balance and tolerance that these forces are attempting to undermine the ideal of the university as a bastion of independent thought and uncorrupted inquiry, to slander - even vilify - an

allegedly liberal and left-oriented professorate, to cut already meager federal funding for higher education, to eliminate tenure and to place control of what is taught and said in classrooms under legislative oversight.

Underlying recent attacks on the university is an attempt not merely to counter dissenting points of view, but to destroy them, and in doing so to annihilate all of those remaining public spaces, spheres and institutions that nourish and sustain a culture of questioning so vital to a Democratic civil society. Within the conservative rhetoric, dissent is often equated with treason, and the university is portrayed as the weak link in the war on terror by powerful educational agencies. Professors who advocate a culture of questioning and critical engagement run the risk of having their names posted on Internet web sites - such as DiscovertheNetworks.org and CampusWatch.org - and being labeled as un-American, while various right-wing individuals and politicians increasingly attempt to pass legislation that renders critical analysis a professional and personal liability and to reinforce a rabid anti-intellectualism under the call, with no irony intended, for balance and intellectual diversity. Genuine politics begins to disappear as people methodically lose those freedoms and rights that enable them to speak and act in public spaces, to exercise their individual right to dissent and to advocate a shared sense of collective responsibility.

While higher education is only one site under attack, it is one of the most crucial institutional and political spaces where Democratic subjects can be shaped, Democratic relations can be experienced and anti-Democratic forms of power can be identified and critically engaged. It is also one of the few spaces left where young people can think critically about the knowledge they gain, learn values that refuse to reduce the obligations of citizenship to either consumerism or the dictates of the national security state and develop the language and skills necessary to defend those institutions and social relations that are vital to a substantive democracy. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt insisted, a meaningful conception of politics appears only when concrete spaces exist for people to come together to talk, think critically and act on their capacities for empathy, judgment and social responsibility. What all this points to is a dire need for educators and others to recognize and take measures against the current attack on higher education that is now threatening to erase the ideas and the practices that enable the academy to fulfill its role as a crucial Democratic public sphere, offering a space both to resist the dark times in which we now live and to embrace the possibility of a future forged in the civic struggles requisite for a viable democracy.

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