Neoliberal Politics as Failed Sociality: Youth and the Crisis of Higher Education

by Henry A. Giroux

More often than not, hopes are difficult to recognize in the realities they sediment. The ‘invisible hand’ of the market operated by selfish individuals in search of their own wealth and pleasure seemed to be rather reluctant or impotent to save humans from the horrors of reciprocal cruelties; most certainly, it managed neither to liberate most humans from the bondage of passions, nor to make completely happy those few whom it succeeded in freeing.

Zygmunt Bauman

Introduction

Within the last forty years, the United States under the reign of neoliberalism, or market fundamentalism as it has been called in some quarters, has been transformed into a society that is more about forgetting than learning, more about consuming than producing, more about asserting private interests rather than democratic rights, more about producing a culture of cruelty than a democratic polity imbued with a sense of social responsibility. Not only are all vestiges of the social state under siege, but the attack on public values that has been waged aggressively by neoliberalism since the late 1970s has now taken a very aggressive and dangerous turn, particularly with the rise of the Tea Party movement, the enactment of the corporate friendly Citizens United Supreme Court decision, the seizure of state sovereignty by corporate powers, and the expansion of the warfare state. Gross inequalities in wealth and income, bankrupt cities, rampant privatization, runaway militarism, unbridled individualism, state sanctioned use of torture, and an obsession with materialism have become normalized to the degree that it is hard to imagine what American society would look like in the absence of these structural and ideological features of the new and militant economic Darwinism that holds sway over the American public. The mantra is well known: government is now the problem, society is a fiction, sovereignty is market-driven, deregulation and commodification are props of the corporate state, and the yardstick of profit is the only viable measure of the good life and advanced society. Public values are now viewed as a liability, if not a pathology. Democratic commitments, social relations, and public spheres are no longer valorized as a symbol of hope. They have become disposable like young people and the expanding populations of the dispossessed, disparaged as a drain on the economy and a threat to neoliberal regimes of truth. In a society obsessed with customer satisfaction and the rapid disposability of both consumer goods and long-term attachments, politics has become not just dystopian but dysfunctional and deeply authoritarian. The American public is no longer offered the opportunities, guidance, and modes of education that cultivate the capacities for critical thinking and engaged citizenship. The formative cultures that provide the preconditions for critical thought and agency and are crucial to any viable notion of the social are being dismantled. Under such circumstances, thought cannot sustain itself and becomes short-lived,
fickle, and ephemeral. If Americans, especially young people, do not display a strong commitment to democratic politics and collective struggle, it is because they have lived through thirty years of what I have elsewhere called “a debilitating and humiliating disinvestment in their future,” especially if they are marginalized by class, ethnicity, and race. What is new about this historical moment for a generation of young people is that they have experienced first-hand the relentless spread of a neoliberal pedagogical apparatus with its celebration of an unbridled individualism and its near pathological disdain for community, public values, and the public good. They have been inundated by a market-driven value system that encourages a culture of competitiveness and produces a theater of cruelty. If labor unions, students, workers, and others are not protesting in large numbers the ongoing intense attack on bargaining rights, labor, higher education, and the welfare state, it may be because they have been born into a society that is tantamount to what Alex Honneth describes as “an abyss of failed sociality [one in which] their perceived suffering has still not found resonance in the public space of articulation.”

Democracy no longer leaves open the importance of and experience of the common good. As a mode of failed sociality, the current version of market fundamentalism turned the principles of democracy against itself, deforming both the language of freedom and justice that made equality a viable idea and political goal. Parading as a species of democracy, neoliberal economics and ideology cancels out democracy as a “as the incommensurable sharing of existence that makes the political possible.”

Symptoms of ethical, political, and economic impoverishment are all around us. In spite of being discredited by the economic recession of 2008, a hyper market fundamentalism has once again returned with a vengeance. The Gilded Age has come back with big profits for the rich and increasing impoverishment and misery for the middle and working class. Political illiteracy has cornered the market on populist rage, providing a political bonus for those who are responsible for massive levels of inequality, poverty, and sundry other hardships. As social protections are dismantled, public servants are denigrated, and public goods such as schools, bridges, health care services, and public transportation deteriorate, with few exceptions, governments across the globe embraces the values of economic Darwinism and rewards its chief beneficiaries: mega banks and big business. Neoliberalism proceeds once again in zombie-like fashion to impose its values, social relations, and forms of social death upon all aspects of civic life. As memories of the achievements of the social state are eviscerated, politics becomes an extension of war and the welfare is largely replaced by the warfare and punishing state. Nowhere is the dismantling of the social state and the transformation of the state into a punishing machine resembling Hobbes’s war of all against all more evident than in the current attacks on youth, labor rights, and higher education being waged by Republican governors in a number of key states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida, and Ohio. What is often missed in these attacks is that the war on the social state and the war on education represent part of the same fabric of destruction and violence. The first war is being waged for the complete control by the rich and powerful of all modes of wealth and income while the second is conducted on the ideological front and represents a battle over the very capacity of young people to imagine a different and more critical mode of subjectivity and alternative mode of politics. If the first war is on the diverse and myriad terrain of political economy the second is being waged though what C. Wright Mills once called the major cultural apparatuses, including public and higher education. In what follows, I first want to delineate the contours of both of these wars as part of a larger effort to destroy any vestige of a democratic imaginary and to relegate the value of the social question to the wasteland political thought.

Waging War on the Social State

There can be little doubt that the America has become a permanent warfare state. Not only is it waging a war in three countries, but its investment in military power is nearly as much as all of the military budgets of
every other country in the world combined. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute states that “The USA’s military spending accounted for 43 per cent of the world total in 2009, followed by China with 6.6 per cent; France with 4.3 per cent, and the UK with 3.8 per cent.”[viii] We have squandered over a trillion dollars fighting useless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pentagon spending for 2011 will be more than $700 billion. To make matters worse, as Tom Englehardt points out “We dominate the global arms trade, monopolizing almost 70% of the arms business in 2008, with Italy coming in a vanishingly distant second. We put more money into the funding of war, our armed forces, and the weaponry of war than the next 25 countries combined (and that’s without even including Iraq and Afghan war costs).”[ix] Moreover, the United States maintains a massive ring of military bases and global presence around the world, occupying “over 560 bases and other sites abroad”[x] and deploying over 300,000 troops abroad, “even as our country finds itself incapable of paying for basic services.”[xii] In spite of how much military expenditures drain much needed funds from social programs, the military budget is rarely debated in Congress or a serious object of discussion among the public.

War is now normalized even as the United States moves closer to a national security state at home and is perceived as an imperial power abroad. Military historian Andrew Bacevich is right in arguing that “The misleadingly named Department of Defense serves in fact as a Ministry of Global Policing.”[xii] War has become a central feature of the American character, yet, what is often unacknowledged is that its perpetual wars abroad are increasingly matched by a number of wars being waged on the domestic front. Such a disconnect becomes clear in the refusal of politicians, anti-public intellectuals, and the general public to acknowledge how the federal deficit has been run up by our military adventures. As Frank Rich argues, “The cultural synergy between the heedless irresponsibility we practiced in Iraq and our economic collapse at home could not be more naked. The housing bubble, inflated by no-money-down mortgage holders on Main Street and high-risk gamblers on Wall Street, was fueled by the same greedy disregard for the laws of fiscal gravity that governed the fight-now-play later war[s]” in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recently in Libya.[xiii] Similarly, as the spirit of militarism bleeds into every facet of American life and politics increasingly becomes an extension of war, and right-wing, liberal, and conservative politicians embrace a militaristic approach to policy and the need to cleanse the social order of any institution, mode of dissent, individuals, groups, and public sphere at odds with its state of permanent war and its militarized and unchecked embrace of economic Darwinism. These foreign and domestic wars are not unrelated, given that they are waged in the interests of right-wing militarists, neo- conservatives, liberals, and corporate moguls—all of whom have a political and economic stake in such military incursions abroad and wars at home. Moreover the costs of armed conflict are directly related to an economic crisis that has produced a wave of political extremism in the United States while furthering the rise of a punishing state that places the burdens of the current economic crisis on the backs of the poor.

War is not merely the outgrowth of polices designed to protect the security and well-being of the United States. It is also, as C. Wright Mills pointed out, part of a “military metaphysics”[xiv]–a complex of forces that includes corporations, defense industries, politicians, financial institutions, and universities. War provides jobs, profits, political payoffs, research funds, and forms of political and economic power that reach into every aspect of society. As a mode of public pedagogy, a state of permanent war needs willing subjects to abide by its values, ideology, and narratives of fear and violence. Such legitimation is largely provided through a culture addicted to the production of organized violence and is largely circulated through various registers of popular culture that extend from high fashion and Hollywood movies to the production of violent video games and music concerts sponsored by the Pentagon. The spectacle of war demands a culture of conformity, quiet intellectuals, and a largely passive republic of consumers. It also necessitates two forms of military intervention that take the form of a corporate war on the social state and a war on any mode of
critical education.

The war on the social state is in high gear and is most evident in a range of polices designed to punish unions, abrogate the bargaining rights of workers, cut social protections, and disinvest in higher education as a site of critical learning while reorganizing it according to the interests and values of a market-driven culture. The mean-spirited and ideologically dogmatic nature of the assault on labor can be seen in Maine’s Republican Governor Paul LePage’s call to remove a 36-foot, 11-panel mural by Judy Taylor from the foyer in the state’s Department of Labor building in Augusta. LePage claims that a number of business officials complained about the mural echoing a sentiment he received in a fax that claimed that the mural “was reminiscent of “communist North Korea where they use these murals to brainwash the masses.” But LePage’s contempt for workers, unions, teachers, and their struggles did not end with the removal of the mural; he also ordered seven conference rooms to be renamed, given that few of them were named after notable labor organizers, including Cesar Chavez, a heroic figure who “led the United Farm Workers union in the sixties and seventies.” LePage’s actions mirror the same disdain for democracy and the social state that is being exhibited by Republican governors in Wisconsin and a number of other states in which draconian measures are being imposed on the unemployed, working poor, middle-class, students, and others who are outside of the radar of politicians in the service of the corporate rich.

The second war, inextricably connected to the war on the social state and democracy itself, is the current assault taking place on higher education. Under the regime of market fundamentalism, institutions that were meant to both critique and limit human suffering and address major social problems have been either weakened or abolished, as are many of those public spheres where private troubles could be understood as social problems and addressed as such. This shift from the basic tenets of the social contract to savage forms of corporate sovereignty is part of a broader process of “reducing state support of social goods [and] means that states—the institutions best placed to defend the gains workers and other popular forces have made in previous struggles—are instead abandoning them.” Faced with massive deficits, states are refusing to raise taxes on the rich or corporations while enacting massive cuts in everything from Medicaid programs, food banks, and worker retirement funds to higher education and health care programs for children. For example, Florida Governor Rick Scott “[has] proposed slashing corporate income and property taxes, laying off 6,700 state employees, cutting education funding by $4.8 billion, and cutting Medicaid by almost $4 billion. Scott’s ultimate plan is to phase the Sunshine state’s corporate income tax out entirely. He [wants] to gut Florida’s unemployment insurance system, leaving unemployed workers ‘with much less economic protection than unemployed workers in any other state in the country.’” As social problems are privatized and public spaces commodified, there has been an increased emphasis on individual solutions to socially produced problems, while at the same time market relations and the commanding institutions of capital are divorced from matters of politics, ethics, and responsibility. How else to explain the lack of massive protests over the recent revelations that massive corporations such as General Electric and the Bank of America paid no taxes in spite of accruing massive financial profits. The commodification of thought and the depoliticization of everyday life has created both a culture of illiteracy and cruelty in which notions of the public good, community, and the obligations of citizenship are replaced by the overburdened demands of individual responsibility and an utterly privatized ideal of freedom.

In the current market-driven society, with its ongoing uncertainties and collectively induced anxieties, core public values regarding compassion for the common good and especially the poor have been abandoned under the regime of a market society that promotes a survival of the fittest economic doctrine. As Jeffrey Sachs points out, “Income inequality is at historic highs, but the rich claim they have no responsibility to the rest of society. They refuse to come to the aid of the destitute, and defend tax cuts at every opportunity.
Almost everybody complains, almost everybody aggressively defends their own narrow, short-term interests, and almost everybody abandons any pretense of looking ahead or addressing the needs of others.”[xxi] Shared sacrifice and shared responsibilities now give way to shared fears and a disdain for investing in the common good. Conservatives and liberals alike seem to view public values, public spheres, and the notion of the common good as either a hindrance to the profit-seeking goals of a market-driven society or a drain on the market-driven social order, treated as a sign of weakness, if not pathology, or even worse, dangerous.[xxii]

The War Against Higher Education

Public spheres that once offered at least the glimmer of progressive ideas, enlightened social policies, non-commodified values, and critical exchange have been increasingly commercialized or replaced by private spaces and corporate settings whose ultimate fidelity is to expanding profit margins. For example, higher education is increasingly defined as another core element of corporate power and culture and as such has to be stripped of its role as democratic public sphere vital to the ideals of democratization. In the current climate, what has become clear is that the neoliberal attack on the social state, workers, and unions is now being matched by a full-fledged assault on higher education. Such attacks are not happening just in the United States but in many other parts of the globe where neoliberalism is waging a savage battle to eliminate all of those public spheres which might offer a glimmer of opposition to market-driven policies, institutions, ideology, and values. Higher Education is being targeted by conservative politicians and governments because it embodies, at least ideally, a sphere in which students learn that democracy as Jacques Rancière suggests a rupture, a relentless critique and dialogue about official power, its institutions, and its never ending attempts to silent dissent.[xxiii]

As Ellen Schrecker points out, “Today the entire enterprise of higher education, not just its dissident professors, is under attack, both internally and externally.”[xxiv] Both in the United States, England and a number of other European countries, universities and businesses are forming stronger ties, the humanities are being underfunded, student tuition is rising at astronomical rates, knowledge is being commodified, and research is valued through the lens of an audit culture. The reach and influence of corporate-based models of education can be seen in their boldest forms in the United Kingdom. Imported and slavishly adopted, the neoliberal educational play book now shapes higher education policy in England, specifically through what has been called the Browne Report. This government sponsored report has established modes of governance, financing, and evaluation that for all intent and purposes makes higher education an adjunct of corporate values and interests.[xxv] Delivering improved employability has reshaped the connection between knowledge and power while rendering faculty and students as professional entrepreneurs and budding customers. The notion of the university as a center of critique and democratic public sphere vitally necessary in providing the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity is giving way to a view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects.[xxvi]

The Browne Report’s guiding assumptions, which mimic the logic driving educational reform in the United States, suggest that student choice, a consumer model of pedagogy, an instrumental culture of auditing practices, and market-driven values are at the heart of the neoliberal university. Like most neoliberal models of education, higher education matters to the extent that it drives economic growth, innovation, transformation, and promotes national prosperity.[xxvii] Even though tuition will be tripled in some cases, numerous schools closed, and higher education effectively remade according to the dictates of a corporate culture, the conservative-liberal government appears indifferent to the devastating consequences its policies will produce. Simon Head has suggested that the Browne policies represent a severe threat to academic
freedom. In actuality, the neoliberal policies it embodies represents a threat to one of the few remaining institutions left in which dissent, critical dialogue, and social problems can be critically engaged.[xxviii] What is often lost in such criticisms is that democracy demands a critical formative culture and set of institutions in which complicated ideas can be engaged, authority challenged, power held accountable, and public intellectuals produced. All of this is now threatened in the United States, England, France, and other countries pushing neoliberal reforms. Under this economic model, there is no talk of social justice, addressing social problems, promoting critical thinking, addressing matters of social responsibility, or engaging critically non-commodified values that might challenge the neoliberal world view.

In the United States, this neoliberal model takes a somewhat different form than in its counterparts abroad since states control the budgets for higher education. Under the call for austerity, states have begun the process of massively defunding public universities while they simultaneously provide massive tax breaks for corporations and the rich. At the same time, higher education in its search for funding has “adopted the organizational trappings of medium-sized or large corporations.”[xxix] University presidents are now viewed as C.E.O.s, faculty as entrepreneurs, and students as consumer. It gets worse. In some universities, new college deans are shifting their focus outside of the campus in order to take “on some of the fund-raising, strategic planning, and partner-seeking duties that were once the bailiwick of the university president.”[xxx] Academic leadership is now defined in part through one’s ability to raise funds, engage in strategic planning, and partner up with corporate donors. In fact, deans are increasingly viewed as the head of complex businesses and their job performance ratings are dependent on their fund-raiseing performances.

As business culture permeate higher education all manner of school practices from food service and specific modes of instruction to hiring temporary faculty are now outsourced to private contractors. Moreover, the most important value of higher education is now tied to the need for credentials. Disciplines and subjects that do not fall within the purview of mathematical utility and economic rationality are now seen as dispensable.[xxx] In the search for adopting market values and cutting costs, classes have ballooned in size, there is an increased emphasis on rote learning and standardized testing, and tuition fees have skyrocketed, making it impossible for thousands of working class youth to gain access to higher education. One of the most serious consequences facing higher education in the United States under the reign of neoliberal austerity and disciplinary measures is the increased casualization of academic labor and the ongoing attacks on tenure and academic freedom.

College presidents not only now align themselves with business values, they willingly and openly associate themselves with corporate interests. Moreover, as universities adopt models of corporate governance, they are aggressively eliminating tenure positions, increasing part-time and full-time positions without the guarantee of tenure, and attacking faculty unions. In a number of states such as Ohio and Utah, legislatures have passed bill outlawing tenure while in Wisconsin, the governor has abrogated the bargaining rights of state university faculty.[xxxii] At a time when higher education is becoming increasingly vocationalized, the ranks of tenure track faculty are being drastically depleted in the United States furthering the loss of faculty as stakeholders. Currently, only 27 percent of faculty are either on a tenure track or have a full-time tenure position. As faculty are demoted to contingency forms of labor, they not only lose their power to influence the conditions of their work, they are seeing their workloads increase, paid poorly, deprived of office space and supplies, refused travel money, and subject to policies that allow them to be fired at will.[xxxiii] The latter is particularly egregious because when coupled with an ongoing series of attacks by right wing ideologues against left oriented and progressive academics, many non-tenured faculty censor themselves in their classes. At a time when critics within the academy are often fired for their political beliefs, have their names posted on right-wing web sites, are forced to turn over their email correspondence to right wing groups,[xxxiv] and
are harassed in the conservative press, it is all more crucial that protections be put in place that safeguard faculty positions and academics to exercise the rights of academic freedom.[xxxv]

What is clear is that the United States is in a state of permanent war and that the casualties are not just on foreign soil. The war at home is being conducted by the same people who benefit from the wars abroad. Right-wing conservatives, politicians, and corporate billionaires who engage in a full-fledged attack to destroy higher education as a democratic public sphere exhibit not only a contempt for the social state, trade unions, and workers, but also any institution capable of producing “an educated population [willing] to sustain a vibrant democracy and culture that provides a key component of the good life.”[xxxvi] Viewed as simply a training ground for the corporate order and the national security state, higher education has defaulted on its promise of democratic future for young people and its investment in a social state. This anti-public social formation has no interest in fostering the educational conditions in which it becomes possible for young people to imagine another world outside of the economic Darwinism that now bears down on every aspect of their lives. While the complexity of such struggles cannot be exaggerated, it is time to develop a new political language that not only connects the dots between the war at home and abroad, but also makes clear that central to the success of such an egregious assault is the destruction of any vestige of higher education as a public good and democratic public sphere. There is more at stake here than simply the abrogation of worker’s bargaining rights and a gratuitous increase in university tuition rates. There is also the question of what kind of society we want to become and what is going to have to be done to stop the arrogant and formidable assault on all vestiges of democratic life now being waged by the financial elite, corporations, conservatives, reactionary think tanks, authoritarian politicians, and a right-wing media that eschews any vestige of honor, decency, and the truth. At the heart of this struggle is not only a need to reclaim the social as part of a struggle for an engaged and critical populace, but also what it means to make pedagogy central to any viable notion of politics, and youth the crucial category in imagining a future in which the social becomes the sphere and foundation for a new understanding of the future.

Youth in Dark Times

The way society conceptualizes youth has changed from viewing youth as a symbol of hope and promise into a sign of trouble and threat. What is clear as a result of this “failed sociality” is that if democracy is going to deliver on its promises not only do young people need to have a passion for public values, social responsibility, and participation in society, but they also need access to those public spaces that guarantee the rights of free speech, dissent, a quality education, and critical dialogue. Young people need to be educated both as a condition of autonomy and for the sustainability of democratization as an ongoing movement. Not only does a substantive democracy demand citizens capable of self- and social criticism, but it also requires a critical formative culture in which people are provided with the knowledge and skills to be able to participate in such a society. What we see in the struggle for educational reforms in Europe and the Middle East is a larger struggle for the economic, political, and social conditions that give meaning and substance to what it means to make democracy possible. When we see 15 year-olds battle the established oppressive orders in the streets of Paris, Cairo, London, and Athens for a more just society, they offer a glimpse of the true potential of youth as a constructive force for trouble making. But this expression of trouble exceeds the dominant society’s eagerness to view youth as a pathology, as monsters, and as a drain on the market-driven order. Instead, trouble in this sense speaks to something more suggestive of what John and Jean Comaroff call the “productive unsettling of dominant epistemic regimes under the heat of desire, frustration, or anger.”[xxxvii] The expectations that frame market-driven societies are losing their grip on young people who can no longer be completely seduced or controlled by the tawdry promises and failed returns of either corporate dominated or politically
authoritarian regimes.

These youth movements tell us that the social visions embedded in casino capitalism and deeply authoritarian regimes have lost both their utopian thrust and their ability to persuade and intimidate through threats, coercion, and state violence. Rejecting the terrors of the present and the modernist dreams of progress at any cost, young people have become, at least for the moment, harbingers of democracy fashioned through the desires, dreams, and hopes of a world based on the principles of equality, justice, and freedom. In doing so, they are pointing to a world order in which the future will certainly not mimic the present. Most importantly, they are gesturing towards a mode of collective politics in which solidarity is matched by a recovery of a notion of the social in which a market-driven society is not synonymous with democracy and private rights are not more important than the social good. Thus the process of democratization itself, never complete and becoming, constitutes the preeminent space of the social for keeping justice alive and the incommensurable spirit of political possibility open.

Notes


[iii]. Ibid., p. 235. I have also taken up this theme in great detail in Henry A. Giroux, Youth in a Suspect Society (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[iv]. Alex Honneth, Pathologies of Reason (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 188.


[XVI]. Ibid. P. 18


[XXII]. Classic examples of this can be found in the work of Milton Friedman and the fictional accounts of Ayn Rand. It is a position endlessly reproduced in conservative foundations and institutes such as the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Hudson Institute, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and the Hoover Institute. One particularly influential book that shaped social policy along these lines is Charles Murray, Losing Ground (New York: Basic, 1994).


online at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees


[xxx]. There are a number of books that address these issues. See, for example, Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004) and Stanley Aronowitz, *Against Schooling: For an Education That Matters*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).


[xxxv]. I take up these attacks in great detail in Henry A. Giroux, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008).


[xxxvii]. Ibid., p. 268.

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