

## Book Review: Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education

October 15, 2019

Elena H. Silverman & David Nguyễn

Giroux, Henry A. *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2019.

Henry Giroux, a prolific voice in the conversation about the engulfing tide of neoliberalism, turns his efforts to examining the neoliberal shaping of higher education. Giroux begins his book with a detailed explication of the “economic Darwinism” that defines the neoliberal agenda. Using his trademark hyper-vigilant language, Giroux sets the stage for a conversation about higher education by reminding readers of the many evils of neoliberalism. He takes care to sufficiently enrage those who may be new to the conversation by highlighting the mechanism of neoliberalism that shapes the socioeconomic world.

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 war is conducted on the ideological front and represents a battle over the very capacity of young people and others to imagine a different and more critical mode of subjectivity and alternative mode of politics. (p. 14)

He goes on to implicate the neoliberal outcomes of over-policing, criminalization of poverty, proliferation of language meant to denigrate and demonize, politics of disposability,

---

This is the authors' version of the work published in final form as:

Silverman, E.H., Nguyễn, D. (15 Oct. 2019). *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. *Teachers College Record*. <https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 23115.

and descent into plutocracy. He connects all of these outcomes to the assault on education as a whole and higher education in particular.

Giroux describes the “ideological narrowing” of the scope of education by contextualizing the standardization and commodification of education at all levels. He examines a world where students are positioned as consumers; faculty as entrepreneurs, and education is reduced to nothing more than training. In Giroux’s estimation, faculty have become liabilities under neoliberalism, posing an imminent threat to the potential of a well-trained and undereducated generation sure to support neoliberalism. The neutralization of this threat then requires strategic disinvestment. The systematic defunding of public higher education across the country results in fewer educational options, unprecedented tuition increases for students, and shrinking salaries and tenure track positions as workloads balloon for faculty. This in turn creates an air of panic for the hoards of students faced with certain debt and the faculty who are facing a more and more precarious professional life. Giroux goes so far as to summon Gramsci as he insists that higher education faculty are systematically being reduced to a subaltern class as their academic and financial freedoms are further and further curtailed by the neoliberal reshaping of higher education.

It is not hopeless, however. As fatalistic as much of Giroux’s rhetoric is, he looks to student resistance around the world for signs of life beyond neoliberalism. Importantly, he begins by examining the possible barriers to resistance, including the crushing debt and unemployment that place activism on the backburner for many young people. He also takes care to include multiple critiques of the activism that we do see in the U.S., citing some who say that there is a certain privilege inherent in activism that is dedicated to issues that young people locate as being outside of themselves, while also citing others who seem to believe

that the privileged middle class are the appropriate “vanguards for change” for their generation. Giroux goes further to examine what issues young people mobilize for, finding that while in the last few decades activism has often been to “deeply conservative ends,” liberal young people are not ideologically superior. He writes:

Resistance among young people has not always been on the side of freedom and justice. Many liberal students for the past few decades, for their part, have engaged in forms of activism that also tend to mimic neoliberal rationalities. The increasing emphasis on consumerism, immediate gratification, and the narcissistic ethic of privatization took its toll in a range of student protests... (p. 65)

Despite this bleak description of student activism, Giroux goes on to highlight the slowly rising tide of activism by young people around the globe. He mentions protests in London, Montréal, Athens, and Cairo, and spends a chapter examining the student protests in Québec that drew the world’s attention to the culture of austerity that resulted in tuition hikes, deep spending cuts, and joblessness for many Québécois. For Giroux, the most important question is not why are U.S. students not as active as their international counterparts, but when will they join in the movement to reshape the neoliberal world order? Higher education will certainly play an important role in the answer to this question.

Giroux also examines the neoliberal influence of money and collegiate sports and how these two have married to damage American values. He mentions the collapse of higher education beholden to big business for its revenue of millions of dollars annually. He explains how this lucrative financial dependence led to the largest scandal in higher education when Pennsylvania State University enabled Jerry Sandusky to abuse young boys. Big money, sports,

and masculine privilege in higher education are connected to the neoliberal corporate culture that permeates our society. Giroux also cautions university presidents against aligning themselves with corporate capitalists and placing institutional financial burdens on the backs of students.

Similar to student resistance, Giroux urgently calls upon the purpose of higher education and the responsibility of scholars as public intellectuals to fight against wealth and power changing our education system. He notes that while the fight will be hard and violent, it is imperative to spread the word about neoliberal practices in higher education. Democratic visioning of education is becoming absent as shared governance becomes less important. Academics must resist educating students to become “potential employees of Walmart” and rather educate students to be “critical citizens” (p. 137). If higher education does not “enable students to develop a keen sense of prophetic justice, utilize critical analytical skills, and cultivate an ethical sensibility,” then higher education will become illegitimate (p. 139).

In this book, Giroux succinctly describes how the tyranny of neoliberalism is unapologetically changing our public values and the implications for our democracy, society, and education system. He examines the system broadly and calls to action students, faculty, and institutions to fight and resist the capitalistic norms that have changed how we live and learn.