

## BOOK REVIEW

# Youth in Revolt: Reclaiming a Democratic Future by Henry A. Giroux Paradigm Publishers, 2013

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American scholar Henry Giroux' transfer to Canada's McMaster University a few years ago did not come as a surprise to those who have read his writings and followed his career as a prolific cultural theoretician and critic.

In many of his articles and books, Giroux has called attention to the reactionary tendencies of America's supposedly democratic institutions, including the formal educational system. In his classic books like *Education under Siege* (co-written with Stanley Aronowitz), *Education Still under Siege* (also with Aronowitz), and *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth* which have achieved the status of "must-reads" in critical pedagogies and cultural studies, Giroux unmask these tendencies in American society — tendencies that have promoted right-wing orthodoxy, monoculturalism, and general apathy among others. To confound it all, the state has employed strategies of terror and tension to harass its own citizens and compromise their future. Among the victims of state oppression (regardless of whether it's a Democrat or a Republican at the helm) are young Americans whose

collective future is compromised in favor of creeping militarization and the rule of capital. Like his other works, one of Giroux' recent books, *Youth in Revolt: Reclaiming a Democratic Future*, published by Paradigm Publishers in 2013, sounds the alarm over the serious problems confronting young people in America, especially those who are marginalized because of their color, ethnicity, gender, and/or social class.

The victimization of youth, according to Giroux, has been reinforced by mainstream America's reaction to the 9/11 attacks. While the grim events of September 11 had supposedly brought Americans together in a spirit of collective despair, the sense of loss has been used by the state to justify the imposition of overzealous measures to address potential acts of terrorism and suppress any form of dissent. The state has played bully against its own citizens through its repressive and ideological apparatuses, employing torture and violence not only against its perceived enemies, but also against individuals and groups that it considers "disposable." More specifically, schools have become quasi-military zones in which both teachers and students are subjected to disturbing security policies. Young people are being disciplined in ways that are intended to promote servility in order to suppress critical thinking and inquiry. With the paranoia brought about by the 9/11 attacks, school campuses came under the intense surveillance of state security agents.

But Giroux looks at the bigger picture. The American state's aggressive stance against dissenters (within its own territory and beyond) squares with the promotion of market interests which, according to Giroux, are "neither a relative nor a friend to society" (p. 103). To state the obvious, free-market fundamentalism, in practice, is not really free for it fosters inequality and the immiseration and disenfranchisement of so many while ensuring the continuous flow of profit for the unscrupulous elements that exist in any given society, such as "Wall Street financiers and hedge fund managers who brought the world economy to the brink of ruin in 2008" (p. 105). Interestingly, Giroux calls attention to a rather "strange twist" in America's national politics. In particular, right-wing politicians are now invoking "class warfare," long the shibboleth of the left, to promulgate individual survival under the reign of capital. The right's version of "class warfare" is, quite ironically, an assault against the working class itself,

leading to the loss of employment opportunities and social protections through the oligarchy's anti-democratic impositions. "Class warfare," in the right-wingers' vocabulary, has almost nothing to do with class, stressing instead the logic of self-help that dissolves the importance of the social and the communal.

Giroux claims, however, that the spectacles of social inequality and violence have not been completely ignored. He cites, in particular, the Occupy Wall Street movement as a ray of hope against the rule of capital and the abuses of the state. Despite its protean character (and the dwindling number of protestors through the years), the movement has concretized the simmering opposition to a status quo dominated by the state-big business nexus. Giroux believes that the movement confirmed and continues to show how equality and justice need to be reclaimed as crucial political categories and discursive tools to be used by all those (marginalized) groups – including workers, young people, people of color, women, and the elderly – for understanding the injustices being waged in such a ruthless fashion against young people and other members of a declining and decaying social order (p.117)

The movement has notably exposed the pains that society has undergone and experienced with the prioritization of market fundamentalism over collective interests, of "casino capitalism" over concrete opportunities for human beings to become productive citizens. Giroux also praises Occupy movement's offshoots in higher education institutions, which constitute one variety of people's responses to the alarming corporatization of the American educational system. According to Giroux:

An expanding Occupy movement will hopefully energize a collective resistance — determined in its mission to expand the capacities to think otherwise; courageous in its attempts to take risks; brave in its willingness to change the nature of the questions asked; dedicated to its role of holding power accountable; and thoughtful in its efforts to provide the formative culture for young people and everyone else for those economic, social, and cultural conditions that are essential both to their future and to democracy itself. (p.140)

The analogy may be far off, but the call for the movement to expand and multiply is reminiscent of Che Guevara's famous call for the creation of "two, three...many Vietnams" in the 1960's to internationalize the struggle against US military aggression.

As always, Giroux' commentary is tart and provocative, interspersing scholarly insights with none-too-subtle calls for resistance. The uninitiated may consider it propaganda rather than scholarship in the traditional sense of the word. This is by no means a defect, however, for it is very much in accordance with Giroux' dictum that the transformative intellectual should also be a cultural provocateur, taking sides especially in favor of the underrepresented and the oppressed or those whom liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez calls the "underside of history." Looming large in Giroux' book is a framework of resistance fusing the language of critique with the language of hope and possibility—an idea he appropriates from earlier theoreticians like Bertolt Brecht and Paulo Freire. In particular, Giroux views the Occupy Wall Street movement as an embodiment of the possibility that, yes, *change can be had!*

And how relevant are Giroux' provocative analyses to us in the Philippines? Very much. For like many in the US, we are also dealing with a dispensation that is sidestepping collective welfare in favor of individual survival. It is made conspicuous, for instance, in the unflinching privatization of publicly owned corporations and the commercialization of social services. Or in the promotion of labor export, the state's de facto job-generating policy, instead of national economic self-sufficiency. Or in government's failure, if not refusal, to solve perennial educational problems while pushing for dubious educational reforms that encourage casual or contractual employment here or overseas. It is also made obvious by the growing number of young people who are out of school, homeless, hungry, and sick, whose future is pawned off by the venal and powerful few, or to borrow the vocabulary of the Occupy movement, our own "One Percent." If there's one thing that makes our situation more complicated than that of America's "99 percent," it is the fact that, as a neocolonial stronghold, we also have to come to terms with US hegemony in its many forms.

Filipino scholars within the left who are tired of the doctrinal praxiology of old, "vanguard" parties should find in Giroux' erudite

insights a whiff of fresh air. His brilliant, interdisciplinary, even eclectic approaches — integrating Marx with Cultural Studies, for instance, or Freire with Foucault — offer creative tactics through which we can understand our own concerns and create spaces for a politics that is critical, empowering, and liberatory.

### Notes on Contributor

**Noel Christian A. Moratilla** recently earned his PhD in Philippine Studies (with Comparative Literature and Socio-Cultural Studies as areas of specialization) from UP Diliman where he also earned his MA in Language Education. He currently heads the Department of Languages and Literature. He has written college and senior high school textbooks, including one on creative nonfiction and another on 21st century literature. He has also presented papers in international and national conferences. Some of his papers have appeared in *Humanities Diliman* (indexed in Scopus), *Diliman Review*, and *Philippine Humanities Review*. He has also served as editor-in-chief of some of SSC's faculty publications, such as *The Scholastican Journal*, *Insights*, and, formerly, the *Journal of Creative Works*. email address: nomorat@yahoo.com