

# Henry Giroux | Beyond Neoliberal Miseducation

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By Henry A Giroux, Truthout | Op-Ed

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*This article draws from a number of ideas in Henry A. Giroux's newest book, Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education.*

As universities turn toward corporate management models, they increasingly use and exploit cheap faculty labor while expanding the ranks of their managerial class. Modeled after a savage neoliberal value system in which wealth and power are redistributed upward, a market-oriented class of managers largely has taken over the governing structures of most institutions of higher education in the United States. As Debra Leigh Scott points out, "administrators now outnumber faculty on every campus across the country."<sup>1</sup> There is more at stake here than metrics. Benjamin Ginsberg views this shift in governance as the rise of what he calls ominously the "the all administrative university," noting that it does not bode well for any notion of higher education as a democratic public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

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stamps.<sup>3</sup> Many students increasingly fare no better in sharing the status of a subaltern class beholden to neoliberal policies and values, and largely treated as consumers for whom education has become little more than a service. Too many students are buried under huge debts that have become a major source of celebration by the collection industry because it allows them to cash in on the misfortune and hardships of an army of indebted students. Under the regime of neoliberal education, misery breeds a combination of contempt and source of profits for the banks and other financial industries. Jerry Aston, a member of that industry, wrote in a column after witnessing a protest rally by students criticizing their mounting debt that he "couldn't believe the accumulated wealth they represent - for our industry."<sup>4</sup> And, of course, this type of economic injustice is taking place in an economy in which rich plutocrats such as the infamous union-busting Koch brothers each saw "their investments grow by \$6 billion in one year, which amounts to three million dollars per hour based on a 40-hour 'work' week."<sup>5</sup> One astounding figure of greed and concentrated power is revealed in the fact that in 2012, the Koch brothers "made enough money in one second to feed one homeless woman for an entire year."<sup>6</sup> Workers, students, youths and the poor are all considered expendable in this neoliberal global economy. Yet the one institution, education, that offers the opportunities for students to challenge these anti-democratic tendencies is under attack in ways that are unparalleled, at least in terms of the scope and intensity of the assault by the corporate elite and other economic fundamentalists.

Casino capitalism does more than infuse market values into every aspect of higher education; it also wages a full-fledged assault on public goods, democratic public spheres, and the role of education in creating an informed and enlightened citizenry. When former presidential candidate Sen. Rick Santorum argued that

A number of colleges and universities are drawing more and more upon adjunct and nontenured faculty - whose ranks now constitute 1 million out of 1.5 million faculty - many of whom occupy the status of indentured servants who are overworked, lack benefits, receive little or no administrative support and are paid salaries that increasingly qualify them for food

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intellectuals were not wanted in the Republican Party, he was articulating what has become common sense in a society wedded to narrow instrumentalist values, ignorance as a political tool, and a deep-seated fear of civic literacy and a broad-based endorsement of the commons. Critical thinking and a literate public have become dangerous to those who want to celebrate orthodoxy over dialogue, emotion over reason and ideological certainty over thoughtfulness.<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt's warning that "it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think"<sup>8</sup> at the heart of authoritarian regimes is now embraced as a fundamental tenet of right-wing politicians and pundits and increasingly has become a matter of common sense for the entertainment industry and the dominant media, all primary modes of an education industry that produces consumers, smothers the country in the empty fog of celebrity culture and denounces democracy as tantamount to the enemy of free-market fundamentalism. How else to explain the willingness of so many people today to give up every vestige of privacy to the social media, the government and anyone else interested in collecting data for the most despicable and anti-democratic purposes. Self-interest does more than embrace a new culture of narcissism; it empties out any viable notion of the social, compassion, and the ethical imagination.

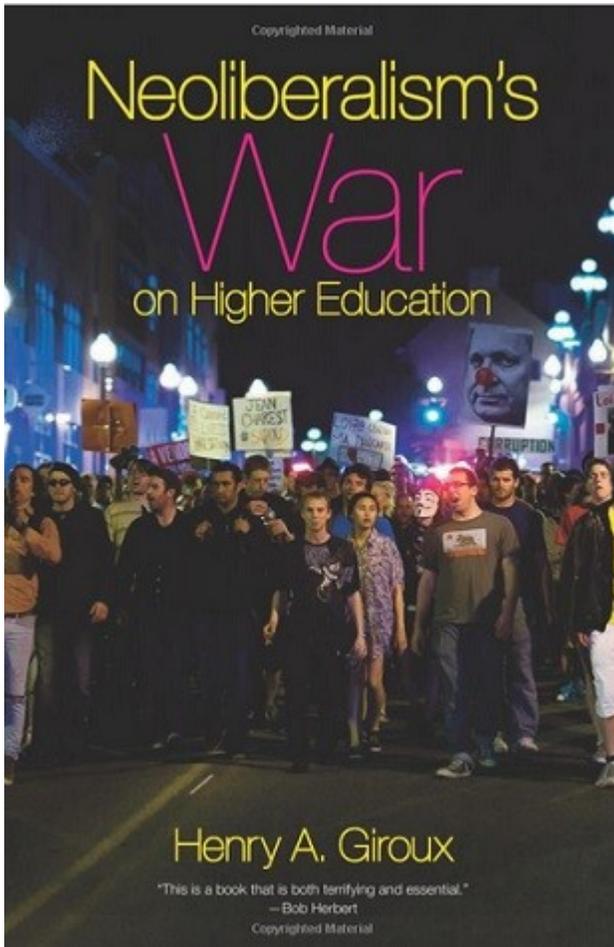
Right-wing appeals to austerity provide the rationale for slash-and-burn policies intended to deprive government-financed social and educational programs of the funds needed to enable them to work, if not survive. Along with health care, public transportation, Medicare, food stamp programs for low-income children, and a host of other social protections, higher education is being defunded as part of a larger scheme to dismantle and privatize all public services, goods and spheres. The passion for public values has given way to the ruthless quest for profits and the elevation of self-interests over the common good. The educational goal of expanding the capacity for critical thought and the outer limits of the imagination have given way to the instrumental desert of a mind-deadening audit culture. But there is more at work here than the march toward privatization and the never-ending search for profits at any cost; there is also the issue of wasteful spending on a bloated war machine, the refusal to tax fairly the rich and corporations, the draining of public funds for the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ongoing consolidation of class power in the hands of the 1 percent.

The deficit argument and the austerity policies advocated in its name is a form of class warfare designed largely for the state to be able to redirect revenue in support of the commanding institutions of the corporate- military-industrial complex and away from funding higher education and other crucial public services. The extent of the budget reduction assault is such that in 2012 "states reduced their education budgets by \$12.7 billion."<sup>9</sup> Liberals and conservatives justify such cuts by pointing to declining revenues brought in by the state but what is missing from this argument is that one major reason for the decline is because of right-wing policies and legislation that lowers the taxes of the rich and major corporations. Of course, the burden of such reductions falls upon poor minority and other low-income students, who will not be able to afford the tuition increases that will compensate for the loss of state funding. As the political state is replaced by the corporate state, tuition rises, the ranks of the poor expand, more social problems are criminalized and the punishing state blooms as a default register for potential dissent.

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What has become clear in light of such assaults is that many universities and colleges have become unapologetic accomplices to corporate, interests, values and power, and in doing so increasingly regard social problems as either irrelevant or make them invisible.<sup>10</sup> The transformation of higher education in the United States and abroad is evident in a number of registers. These include decreased support for

programs of study that are not business-oriented; reduced funds for research that does not increase profit; the replacement of shared forms of governance with rigid business management models; the lessening of financial support for academic fields that promote critical thinking rather than an entrepreneurial culture; the ongoing exploitation of faculty labor; and the use of purchasing power as the vital measure of a student's identity, worth and access to higher education.<sup>11</sup> In addition, many universities are now occupied by security forces whose central message is that dissent and protest, however peaceful, will be squelched through violence. Leftover weapons from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan have found a home on many college campuses that increasingly look as if they have become potential war zones. These weapons stand as a grim reminder that they could be used against all those students who question authority, imagine a more democratic role for the university, and connect learning to social change. Universities are increasingly becoming dead zones of the imagination, managed by a class of swelling bureaucrats, inhabited by faculty who constitute a new class of indentured, if not sometime willing, technicians, and students who are demeaned as customers and saddled with crippling debts. Not all faculty and students fit into this description. Some raise their voices in protests, others enjoy the benefits of being accomplices to power, and others get lost in the orbits of privatized interests or academic specialization. The university is a site of struggle and beset by many contradictions, but I don't believe it is an exaggeration to say that higher education since the late 1970s has been hijacked by a mix of political and economic fundamentalist forces that have worked hard to empty it of what it means to truly educate young people to be knowledgeable, critical, thoughtful and sensitive to the plight of others and the larger society. Most importantly, higher education too often informs a deadening dystopian vision of corporate America and old-style authoritarian regimes that impose pedagogies of repression and disciplined conformity associated with societies that have lost any sense of ethical responsibility and respect for equality, public values and justice. The democratic imagination has been transformed into a data machine that marshals its inhabitants into the neoliberal dream world of babbling consumers and armies of exploitative labor whose ultimate goal is to accumulate capital and initiate faculty and students into the brave new surveillance/punishing state that merges Orwell's Big Brother with Huxley's mind-altering soma.



(Photo: Haymarket Books) One consequence of this

ongoing disinvestment in higher education is the expansion of a punishing state that increasingly criminalizes a range of social behaviors, wages war on the poor instead of poverty, militarizes local police forces, harasses poor minority youths and spends more on prisons than on higher education. The punishing state produces fear and sustains itself on moral panics. Dissent gives way to widespread insecurity and uncertainty and an obsession with personal safety.<sup>12</sup> Precarity has become an organizing principle of a social order so as to legitimate and expand the ranks of those considered disposable while destroying those public sites that give voice to the narratives of those marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality and ideology. Public places are now militarized, and those spaces once designed for dialogue, critique, informed exchange and dissent are occupied by the police and other security forces who have become the most visible register of the surveillance-security state.

Political, moral and social indifference is the result, in part, of a public that is increasingly constituted within an educational landscape that reduces thinking to a burden and celebrates civic illiteracy as foundational for negotiating a society in which moral disengagement and political corruption go hand in hand.<sup>13</sup> The assault on the university is symptomatic of the deep educational, economic and political crisis facing the United States. It is but one lens through which to recognize that the future of democracy depends on achieving the educational and ethical standards of the society we inhabit.<sup>14</sup>

This lapse of the US public into a political and moral coma is also induced, in part, by an ever-expanding, mass-mediated celebrity culture that trades in hype and sensation. It is also accentuated by a governmental apparatus that sanctions modes of training that undermine any viable notion of critical schooling and

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public pedagogy. While there is much being written about how unfair the left is to the Obama administration, what is often forgotten by these liberal critics is that Obama has aligned himself with educational practices and policies as instrumentalist and anti-intellectual as they are politically reactionary, and therein lies one viable reason for not supporting his initiatives and administration.<sup>15</sup> What liberals refuse to entertain is that the left is correct in attacking Obama for his cowardly retreat from a number of progressive issues and his dastardly undermining of civil liberties. In fact, they do not go far enough in their criticisms.

Often even progressives miss that Obama's views on what type of formative educational culture that is necessary to create critically engaged and socially responsible citizens are utterly reactionary and provide no space for the nurturance of a radically democratic imagination. Hence, while liberals point to some of Obama's progressive policies - often in a New Age discourse that betrays their own supine moralism - they fail to acknowledge that Obama's educational policies do nothing to contest, and are in fact aligned with, his weak-willed compromises and authoritarian policies. In other words, Obama's educational commitments undermine the creation of a formative culture capable of questioning authoritarian ideas, modes of governance and reactionary policies. The question is not whether Obama's policies are slightly less repugnant than his right-wing detractors. On the contrary, it is about how educators and others should engage politics in a more robust and democratic way by imagining what it would mean to work collectively and with "slow impatience" for a new political order outside of the current moderate and extreme right-wing politics and the debased, uncritical educational apparatus that supports it.<sup>16</sup>

The transformation of higher education into an adjunct of corporate control conjures up the image of a sorcerer's apprentice, of an institution that has become delusional in its infatuation with neoliberal ideology, values and modes of instrumental pedagogy. Universities now claim that they are providing a service and in doing so not only demean any substantive notion of governance, research and teaching, but also abstract education from any sense of civic responsibility. Higher education reneged on enlightenment ideals and lost its sense of democratic mission, but it also increasingly offers no defense to the "totalitarianism that haunts the modern ideal of political emancipation."<sup>17</sup> Driven by an audit culture and increasingly oblivious to the demands of a democracy for an informed and critical citizenry, it now devours its children, disregards its faculty, and resembles an institution governed by myopic accountants who should be ashamed of what they are proud of. The university needs to be reclaimed as a crucial public sphere where administrators, faculty and students can imagine what a free and substantive democracy might look like and what it means to make education relevant to such a crucial pedagogical and political task. This could be a first step in taking back higher education as a precondition for developing a broad-based social movement for the defense of public goods, one capable of both challenging the regime of casino capitalism and re-imagining a society in which democracy lives up to its promises and ideals.

## NOTES

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2 Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of The Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3 Hart Research Associates, *American Academics: Survey of Part Time and Adjunct Higher Education Faculty* (Washington, D.C.: AFT, 2011). Steve Street, Maria Maisto, Esther Merves, and Gary Rhoades, *Who Is Professor "Staff" and How Can This Person Teach So Many Classes?* (Los Angeles: Center for the Future of Higher Education, 2012).

4 Andrew Martin and Andrew W. Lehren, "A Generation Hobbled by the Soaring Cost of College," *The*

*New York Times* (May 12, 2012), Page A1.

5 Paul Buchheit, "Five Ugly Extremes of Inequality in America – The Contrasts Will Drop Your Chin to the Floor," *Alternet*, (March 24, 2013).

6 Paul Buchheit, "4 ways the Koch brothers' wealth is incomprehensible," *Salon* (November 27, 2013).

7 For an excellent defense of critical thinking not merely as a skill but as a crucial foundation for any democratic society, see Robert Jensen, *Arguing for Our Lives* (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2013).

8 Cited in Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (London: Polity Press, 2005), Pages 7-8.

9 Paul Buchheit, "Now We Know Our ABCs And Charter Schools Get an F," *CommonDreams.org* (September 24, 2012).

10 See, Henry A. Giroux, *The University In Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007).

11 See, for instance, Robert B. Reich, "Slashed Funding for Public Universities Is Pushing the Middle Class Toward Extinction," *AlterNet*, (March 5, 2012). For a brilliant argument regarding the political and economic reasons behind the defunding and attack on higher education, see Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008).

12 Les Leopold, "Crazy Country: 6 Reasons America Spends More on Prisons Than On Higher Education," *Alternet* (August 27, 2012). On this issue, see also the classic work by Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Open Media, 2003); and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

13 Leopold, "Crazy Country"

14 Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (London: Polity, 2001), Page 4.

15 See, for instance, Rebecca Solnit, "Rain on Our Parade: A Letter to the Dismal Left," *TomDispatch.com* (September 27, 2012). *TomDispatch* refers to this article as a call for hope over despair. It should be labeled as a call for accommodation over the need for a radical democratic politics. For an alternative to this politics of accommodation, see the work of Stanley Aronowitz, Chris Hedges, Henry Giroux, Noam Chomsky and others.

16 This term comes from Daniel Bainsaid. See Sebastian Budgen, "The Red Hussar: Daniel Bensaïd, 1946-2010," *International Socialism* 127 (June 25, 2010).

17 Michael Halberstam, "Introduction," *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics*, (Yale University Press, 1999), Page 1.

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*Memories and the Culture of Cruelty* (Routledge 2012), *Youth in Revolt: Reclaiming a Democratic Future* (Paradigm 2013), and *The Educational Deficit and the War on Youth* (Monthly Review Press, 2013), *America's Disimagination Machine* (City Lights) and *Higher Education After Neoliberalism* (Haymarket) will be published in 2014). Giroux is also a member of Truthout's Board of Directors. His web site is [www.henryagiroux.com](http://www.henryagiroux.com). Truthout readers receive a 30% discount by clicking the link and inserting the Code: TOGIR (please note that this code is cap-sensitive) on the following books: *Youth in Revolt: Reclaiming a Democratic Future*, March 2013; *The Twilight of the Social: Resurgent Politics in an Age of Disposability*, April 2012; *Hearts of Darkness: Torturing Children in the War on Terror*, August 2010; *Politics After Hope: Obama and the Crisis of Youth, Race, and Democracy*, April 2010; and *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*, June 2007.