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Book Review

The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear by Henry A. Giroux, Palgrave Macmillan 2003

Reviewed by

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Henry Giroux, Waterbury Chair Professor in Secondary Education at Pennsylvania State University, finds the nation's children threatened and argues that the threat comes not from terrorists nor from any external source but from the market capitalists that currently hold power in this country. Early in his book Mr. Giroux quotes the Children's Defense Fund, "The war on terrorism is no excuse not to prevent and stop the domestic terrors of child poverty, hunger, homelessness, and abuse and neglect right now." To this sentiment Mr. Giroux adds a set of facts and figures to back his contention that the present administration is neglectful, at the very least, of the nation's children. He points out that while one third of this nation's children will live in poverty at some point in their lives, tax breaks for the rich in 2002 amounted to forty times the amount allocated for education. He also notes that these tax breaks occurred two years after the President stated that, "the biggest percentage of our budget should go to education." "Bush's 2003 education budget cut and froze far more children's programs than the few it increased, allocating \$2.8 billion in net increased spending while cutting \$3.2 billion from the education budget." Mr. Giroux is keenly aware of the harm that budgetary and policy decisions might have on the physical lives of children; at the same time he is acutely aware of their effects on children's minds.

Beyond monetary neglect, the author finds social and psychological threats to the children in the current administration's educational programs. In his chapter, "Leaving Most Children Behind," Mr. Giroux argues that standardized testing promotes a minimal level of competence in a range of skills that match those befitting the workers who earn the least. He also argues that standardized

testing is part of a philosophy that negates what is public or social and emphasizes the individual. Standardized testing conforms education and discourages critical thinking which the author feels is key to a democracy. Indeed, standardized testing emphasizes the individual and his or her personal gain while also promoting conformity and the idea that only a few others, the test makers, know what is right. Such testing, as is the case with other administration policies, ignores the larger social context and focuses on the individual. In one school district a student in a inner city school is required to pass the same tests as a student in a suburban school that receives \$39,000.00 more dollars per student. Mr. Giroux quotes research that shows that standardized tests have always benefited the rich and powerful; and the benefits may be quite direct. He notes that the Bush family is a "long-standing friend" of the textbook and testing company McGraw-Hill.

Fiscal neglect and miseducation are other components of a larger campaign against children. The young, especially teenagers, are held to be criminal in nature and are even treated like criminals as schools increasingly resemble prisons physically and socially with zero-tolerance policies, drug-testing, and dress codes. Mr. Giroux notes that in most states 16-years-olds need their parent's permission to have their ears pierced. These same children can, however, suffer the death penalty, the United States being the only industrialized nation that sentences minors to death. Zero-tolerance in school and in law punishes - it does not instruct; for the market capitalist, there is perhaps no need to instruct. The market capitalist's focus on the role of the individual concurrently absolves policy makers and society of any responsibility to change or affect the context that influences the individual. In turn, efforts to privatize schools derive in part from a disdain of what is public and not private or market-based. Education is not meant to enhance a human being. It is a possession; a product that once acquired by consumers allows them some economic mobility in the neoliberal's matrix, the market.

Not only are our children and teenagers being set aside as moneyed interests are served but our own civil liberties and democratic processes are put in jeopardy. In his chapter entitled, Higher Education Inc., the author examines the increasing role of corporations in college funding and structure. College presidents are increasingly being hired directly from the business community, business representatives sit on faculty committees with control of research funding, and corporations donate faculty chairs that benefit the corporation. Kmart approved the appointment of a businessman it had worked with for years to its chair at Wright State University. This person then approved research projects that benefited Kmart since there was no need for Kmart to conduct that research. Mr. Giroux sites the trends of using part-time faculty and internet instruction as part of a process that disempowers faculty and places control in management in

the way businesses are operated. He feels that institutions of higher education are essential as institutions where nonstandard ideas may find a home and develop and that corporate influence in the college is therefore antithetical to free thought and democracy. He quotes Toni Morrison:

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.

Whatever their effects on schools and colleges, Giroux finds that market capitalists exert their most harmful influence below the level of policies and programs to alter what makes us human and good.

The onslaught of neoliberal ideology and its turn towards the free market as the basis for human interaction attempt to alter radically the very vocabulary we use to describe and appraise human interest, action, and behavior. Individuals are now largely defined as consumers, and self-interest appears to be the only factor capable of motivating people.

Giroux argues convincingly against policies he feels depreciate what we should bequeath to the next generation. He argues forcefully, as he should, against what he sees as an attempt to miniaturize a generation of children from free-thinking social beings to beings contorted to fit a free market.

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