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Book Review

Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis

by Henry A. Giroux

Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 273 pages

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I teach English and history to 11th and 12th graders in a public high school north of the Golden Gate Bridge. My school is in many ways a typical California high school, with student populations, community demographics, and geographical divides than can be found around the state. Late last spring, as the Covid-19 pandemic entered its second wave,

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my high school students described exhaustion with always thinking, reflecting, and reading about the pandemic. The pandemic had, at this point, abated just enough locally to allow school to open, albeit with severe limitations on class size, distance, and instructional minutes. The pandemic was all they ever thought about, but it was just too much to always think about. It was easy to forget amidst the lesson planning, grading, nearly infinite meetings, and the other accumulating responsibilities of teachers (and practically all workers) during this time.

To cope with the exhaustion of our present moment, we shifted our gaze towards another pandemic - the Black Death, documented, in an oblique way, in *The Decameron*. The story revolves around a group of young Florentines who flee the city to escape the plague, telling stories to pass the time. It is a sort of photograph of how 14th-century people managed their own shelter-in-place orders, travel restrictions, and health advisories. Author Giovanni Boccaccio (2013) begins his preface to *The Decameron* with the lines:

It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer, and although it is fitting for everyone to do so, it is especially desirable in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others. (p. 3)

My students found neither distraction nor comfort in those lines, but they did find a sort of moral clarity. Boccaccio here reminds us that our ethical obligations do not stop at our front doors but extend infinitely outward to include others.¹ Indeed, our humanity is contingent on it. Arguably, this is as true today as it was in Boccaccio's time.

¹Though beyond the scope of this review, I think it's not a stretch of the imagination to include those who profit off others' labor within Boccaccio's category of those who have received comfort from others, thus inviting a neoliberal critique aligned with the values of the reviewed book. For more on the politics of Boccaccio, including those suggested here, see: Barsella (2007), Hankins (2019), or Newman (2020).

It is into this contingency that Henry Giroux (2021) ventures in *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy*. Giroux, a prolific social and cultural critic with hundreds of citations and interests that span from critical pedagogy to media studies, is well-equipped to scrutinize the wide impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. He views it not as an isolated global health crisis, but rather as a series of overlapping and nested crises: “not only an economic and political struggle but also an educational struggle,” “devastation produced by neoliberal capitalism,” “a contemporary resurgence of authoritarianism,” “the ideologies of racial cleansing, militarism, and a politics of disposability,” and so on (Giroux, 2021, pp. x-xi). Of course, Giroux is not attributing the pandemic to any one of these factors alone but suggesting instead that each one is a structural weakness that compounds the pandemic, exacerbating its tragedy. The convoluted knot of crises is best understood as what Giroux terms the “pandemic pedagogy” that guide the book’s first three sections, a complex “system of knowledge, ideas, values, and desires.... [that work] subconsciously as an affective mode of self-sabotage” (Giroux, 2021, pp. xii-xiii). Obviously, pandemic pedagogy is not limited to classrooms, but is rather a broader social mode that mimics formal schooling, shaping and directing relations and identities.

In understanding pandemic pedagogy, Giroux takes readers through a simply exhaustive analysis of the early months of the pandemic, covering the hollowing out of state apparatuses that could have prevented or mitigated the effects, the parallel state violence and human rights abuses, and the erosion of inter- and transnational cooperation. Admittedly, reading this catalog of horrors from recent memory is trying; perhaps Giroux focuses a little too narrowly on the Trump administration’s missteps and abuses of power in an attempt to establish undeniable responsibility for the ongoing crisis, but it is a meticulously sourced, cross-referenced, and sequenced archaeology of the last year and a half. Of course, philosophers and theorists figure prominently, but are buttressed by an extensive list of

journalists, politicians, and other public figures. The result is a rich tapestry that reads as equal parts oral history and academic monograph.

Across this rich retelling, a few dominant threads arise. First, Giroux is deeply concerned with the media and the public's desire to simplify Trump and his presidency. Trumpism is, he argues, an integral part of a long-term and ongoing political project that aims to remake power relations in the United States (and subsequently abroad). Second, he emphasizes the theme of thoughtlessness, describing how media, politicians, markets, and even the structure of our institutions promote an unreflective and unself-aware mode of being, preferring a partisan identity, interested in political gamesmanship, rather than a deep (and intersectional) political one interested in social reform. The result of this thoughtlessness is a language of violence that demonizes and promotes harms, posing a challenge for human rights educators who strive to develop widespread critical consciousness. Most importantly, however, Giroux points toward an overall erosion of human agency as meaningful. Meanwhile, demonstrable social participation (or protest) becomes constrained to fewer and fewer acceptable avenues until all that remains is, what political theorist (and Giroux favorite) Hannah Arendt (1958) terms, "*animal laborans*," or a drudge or beast of burden (p. 85).

Luckily for readers, these multivariate threats evoke various productive responses. Giroux calls on activists and thinkers to make the invisible mechanisms of power visible, highlighting the way control over people functions and is reproduced. He also emphasizes the need for a substantive "politics of resistance," a project that transcends objections to a single issue or piece of legislation and evolves into a fully realized counterhegemonic bloc (Giroux, 2021, p. 69). In addition, he correctly identifies education as an integral site for contesting pandemic pedagogy. "The pedagogical task," Giroux says, "is to transform anger and emotional investments into forms of critical understanding and the organized desire for collective resistance in multiple sites and platforms" (pp. 165–116). The challenge is to find local and immediate ways to transform education into an emancipatory and liberatory exercise. If Giroux maps a path forward, it is through the "social hope" embodied in the "radical imagination" (p. 140).

In the conclusion, perhaps the book's most important section, he shifts beyond diagnosing the present and looks toward some potential opaque futures. Giroux rightly asserts that international, cross-cultural, intergenerational, and mass solidarity is the only truly useful strategy. He also calls for a doubling-down of education as the means for producing critical consciousness, especially recognizing the connection between capitalism and racism (and anti-Blackness in particular). Furthermore, Giroux underscores the ongoing need to collectivize our struggles and resist further atomization and predation. If there is a future, he suggests, we can only reach it together.

Giroux's book is most helpful as a mirror, holding up the Covid-19 pandemic as the object of analysis. As such, it might best function in the same way that Boccaccio's text in one way does - as a historical document that captures a truth and contradiction of our times. The book is also appropriate alongside other texts that attempt to capture, tease apart, and name the various through lines that define a moment, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2018) *We Were Eight Years in Power*, his book exploring the Obama presidency and the surrounding context, or Mariana Mora's (2017) excellent *Kuxlejal Politics*, which documents the Zapatista's 20-year quest for autonomy. The book also bears similarity to Harsha Walia's (2021) *Border and Rule* and Ellen Meiksins Wood's (2017) seminal *The Origins of Capitalism* in that both approach their subject both from an interdisciplinary lens and several different entry points. Giroux clearly demarcates many of the compounding crises that produced and exacerbated the pandemic, and as such is useful for thinkers beyond education. Educators and educational theorists can take the solutions that Giroux gestures towards and apply them to local contexts, provided they heed his call for mass solidarity as the precondition for a better future.

Giroux's deep concern, furthermore, invites two avenues for human rights. First, his emphasis on solidarity and mass-movements as the primary vehicle for positive social progress connects with theories of transformative human rights education, in particular the emphasis on agency offered by Bajaj (2018) and others. Secondly, the attention he draws toward the erosion of democratic norms means that universal human rights are a promise that

must still be guaranteed by the careful work of governments and international bodies as well as demanded and fought for by activists. The task of human rights educators, meanwhile, is to connect these two: in other words, I must simultaneously expose the interconnected crises of the pandemic with my students, work to alleviate the asymmetrical effects experienced locally, and support them in making a more just tomorrow.

I am reminded of another passage from yet another plague novel I read and discussed with my high school students. This one, from Albert Camus' (1947) novel *The Plague*, attests to the need for critical education, rejecting ignorance and building solidarity. "The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance," says the narrator, Dr. Rieux, who first advised the residents of Oran to prevent the spread of the plague, "and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding...and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness" (p. 131). Giroux's *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy* invites us to consider the complex historical circumstances that frame the present, creating analytical lenses to help us see more clearly – and hopefully make a world more filled with love and understanding.

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