

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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Culture, Politics & Pedagogy *A Conversation with Henry Giroux*

Transcript

Introduction

GIROUX: My name is Henry Giroux, and I'm at Mc Master University here in Hamilton Canada. I am the global TV network chair in English and Communications.

On Paolo Freire

GIROUX: I was a high school teacher in the early, in the early sixties and I was working with a principal a vice principal who was raising lots of questions about my pedagogy And I have been putting students in circle and sort defying what was then a very regimented sort of militaristic kind of utterly barring sterile form of approach to teaching.

And he didn't like it and he was asking me all sorts of questions about how I could justify this and the fact of the matter is I didn't have the language to justify it.

I felt it was right but I couldn't really talk about it in a way that was convincing and somebody had given me a copy of Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy Of the Oppressed" in which all of a sudden I had a language the allowed me in a very fundamental way to sort not only explain what I was doing but to get a greater sense of why I was doing it, and soon afterwards I wrote a long review of Paulo's book and I sent it to a journal called "Interchange" actually in Canada who then sent it to Paulo to review and Paulo wrote back something like this should have been reviewed the day before yesterday this should have been published the day before yesterday.

He had an interesting sense of humor.

He then wrote to me and said "I just love this, this is really captures the essence of my work," and the a correspondence began and then we you know we eventually became friends and we became co-editors of a series we became co-

authors over the years and so you know it developed into a long friendship of about fifteen to seventeen years.

I think that what I loved about Paulo Was that he never separated good food and romance, poetry, and joy from his pedagogy And I remember once when we first met him in Boston, he came to Boston, and we were sitting at the house and we were making dinner and he was, he seemed a little hesitant and I had later found out that he told my friend who was with him that night, he said if the food is really bad, he said, “let’s be kind and then we’ll make an excuse to go to a Portuguese restaurant.” Well, the food was then served and he threw up his hands and he said, “Thank God.” He said: “Giroux, this is so good!”

I mean it was perfect in the sense of how he both integrated his life into everyday life.

He an incredibly attentive listener and not so as to suggest he was simply being cordial he was alive with the possibility of always learning something from someone else, and it made you feel very different, it made you, I mean, it never made you never felt you were in the presence of somebody who was simply interviewing himself and I think that what made him so incredibly powerful was not just how smart he was but how his presence so fully embodied, in more, in unlike anybody I’ve actually been around fully embodied what he believed I mean it was a very rare, and I’m really not romanticizing this, you know I mean a very rare combination of a humility, a commitment, and an enormously resourceful intelligence.

Freire’s Legacy

GIROUX: I mean you’ve got to understand something, you know Paulo’s work emerged in you know, in Brazil.

In the mist of an attempt to take seriously the relationship between education and social change, right.

In an attempt to sort of dignify the subject of learning, the student, you know, in an attempt to in some way be attentive to questions of contextualization, I mean, to link education to particular forms of individual and social empowerment, I mean Paulo’s pedagogy was forged in a kind of struggle to link education to justice.

While those conditions are different today in a sense the conditions that exist this move towards a general notion of authoritarianism in the United States seen in it’s militarism, you know, seen in it’s market fundamentalism, you know, seen in kind of horrible religious fundamentalism that has nothing to do with genuine religious compassion and insight.

All speak to the need for a kind of education that Paulo talked about, one in which the subject is confirmed, right.

One in which learning is linked to notions of critical engagement.

One in which schools are not merely seen as test centers.

I think that what Paulo's language does is provide one of the few resources around that we have in the mist of a dominant educational policy that is the antithesis of what Freire talked about.

For me, Paulo was a model of what it meant to link the political and the personal.

Meaning that the political wasn't some abstraction removed from everyday life that manifested itself in the form of books and essays that were then read by six people, you know I mean his work was consistently linked to social issues that he took seriously, that in some way suggested some sort of connection between what we do as individuals, as educators, as teachers, and what it meant to engage public life, so that that was very important to me.

On a more personal level, I mean I was always inspired by his commitment,

I mean he, you know he never fell prey to a kind of cynicism, you know that seemed to suggest, that you know it's not worth it, or politics doesn't matter, or other people don't matter, and that's always been very inspiring for me and I think that in some ways while you know it's not true as some people would say that I'm merely a Freirian, you know, certainly his work is provides one valuable resource in my work that consistently nourishes it, politically, ethically, democratically.

From Theory to Practice

GIROUX: I think around the theory practices, I think it's a genuinely important question, I mean I mean many teachers really don't understand two things, right.

They don't understand the relevance of theory for what they do, and in many cases they often find themselves in places where time is such devaluation.

That it becomes difficult to really think about what role theory might play in their lives, or they find themselves in situations where theory has been expunged from the possibility of what they do as teachers because they have been utterly deskilled and technicised, right.

So I think that that's, we have to begin with that kind, that qualification.

I mean, I think the second issue is you should never engage in a practice for which you're not reflective about that practice.

I mean you can talk about a practice without theory but to do that is deny the fact that it is already informed by theoretical presuppositions.

Many of which you are just simply not aware of.

So there real, there always is a connection, it's just a question whether you are aware of it, that's the really basic issue.

Around the question of theory and how it translates, I mean I think that there are all kinds of questions that emerge theoretically that are enormously important for understanding how we would operate on a day-to-day basis.

What I don't think theory does do and what it should not do is provide a prescription for what to do that bypasses the need to understand that you have to think about what you do in the context in which you find yourself.

Theory is a resource that's how we should view it and we draw from that resource in order to for instance raise questions about the relationship between knowledge and power, you know why do we choose this over that, right?

To raise questions about how do you understand the cultural capital that kids often bring to the classroom, and how might that work, you know how might it become a learning resource we need theory to sort of in some way reflect on the role that we play as intellectuals as teachers, I mean how do you theorize that?

How do you theorize your own role as an intellectual in the classroom, I mean that all of those questions are theoretical questions that point to theoretical resources it's better to be reflective about what we do than not to be.

So the question of whether theory matters is a bogus question.

It always matters.

The question is whether you are aware of how it matters and whether you have a grasp of those traditions.

So as to be able to have a larger sort of pool of resources to inform the behavior you engage in, nobody operates in a context in which they can be disposed of the necessity to think critically about what they're doing.

That points to the necessity of theory.

That points to a fundamental basis for agency, theory is not some abstract convoluted text that you are sort of plowing through and thinking, “what does this have to do with me? I’m in the trenches.”

I think that’s the most anti intellectual, I think it’s an over used and highly valued position that we need to just get rid of, we need to get rid of the notion that pragmatism is the best teacher.

Pragmatism is not the best teacher just because you’re in the trenches doesn’t mean you’ll be reflective about anything it doesn’t mean that you’ll be thoughtful about any of the practices you engage in.

And it seems to me I’ll always err on the side of a thoughtful practitioner, a thoughtful teacher than I will on the side of somebody who in a sense even when they are doing the right thing can’t even explain it, can’t even theorize the experiences that produce it, can’t even articulate in ways to make it useful to others.

Liberating Teaching

GIROUX: I mean the issue is not how they do it, though that’s not irrelevant, you know the issue really is: Ok, what are the conditions that would make this possible, who are the agents that would carry this out, right?

What is the project that would give it meaning?

So it seems to me it is a larger issue, I mean I don’t want to just blame teachers and say, “Gee, what do teachers have to do?”

You know that’s an enormous burden to place on the shoulders of teachers, right?

Because you’re really talking about not just simply an ideological transformation, you are really talking about a structural transformation you can’t separate education and the act of teaching from the larger social order, you can’t do it.

So where do we begin with a question like that?

It seems to me the first place to begin is to suggest that education is so fundamental to the nature of a democracy that it should be given as much money, as much interest, as much concern, as we give the military.

So it seems to me that if the right wing ever got anything right the only thing I remember they got right was when they said that, you know not having a proper education is like you know not having a proper defense.

And I think they are right, I think that you have a bad educational system and you have a system that really can't defend itself to keep a substantial and inclusive democracy going, right.

Secondly it seems to me that you can't separate the question of what it means for teachers to do a good job unless you take seriously questions of inequality and power.

Inequality and power, very simple, you know.

Why should we have schools that perform so well in Scarsdale, NY and schools that perform terribly in Boston, is that just about teachers?

Or are we talking about resources are we talking about you know all kinds of conditions all kinds of conditions that make those schools work as opposed to making other schools, which I don't know what it means when I walk into a school in Scarsdale, NY, or as Jonathan Kozol does in many of his films and you see a school in which you have Olympic swimming pools, you have brand new computers in every lab, and you have teachers looking so spiffy driving those little Saab's, right.

Then all of a sudden then scene switches and we get to Boston and you have a school with holes in the roof, 400 students in a classroom, teachers who look battered and haggard, and have are just completely overwhelmed, you know writing lesson plans on toilet paper, so I guess money matters.

And I, and I, guess the first question we really have to raise here is you know, what does it mean to eliminate the those kinds of inequalities so teachers have chance to be agents, they have to have a chance.

If they don't have a chance they are going fail and it's not even their fault anymore, right.

Then there's the question, around this question of power, what does it mean to really be a teacher?

I mean, does it mean that you have to sort of everyday set down 700 objectives, and follow them the next day and sort of link those objectives to the outcomes and then sort report them, stay up half the night doing that and completely ignore what it means to be creative to work in the community to make connections with students, to learn about their histories, to be able to read and be able to do research.

In other words teachers can't be deskilled and then be blamed for what it means for an education to fail they can't do it.

It just is not going to happen, you know.

That's going to call for a kind of revolution among teaching.

Now to move to a more precise answer, it seems to me that you have in this country colleges of education that take on an enormous responsibility in educating teachers to be engaged public intellectuals, if I may use that term, right.

Unfortunately, since the 1980's, many of these schools have completely violated what it means to operate a school of education with any vision and dignity.

They've become training centers.

They've reverted back to becoming normal schools.

They've deleted from the curriculum any sense of social justice; any sense of addressing urban problems; any sense of bringing in more minorities, so as to make the teaching force more representative; any sense of broadening the scope of what teachers know, so that they're not mere specialists, who can't make any link whatsoever between their subject matter and other issues, the multiple issues that sort of in some way shape students lives.

There has to be a revolution in the schools of ed, a revolution I mean, and if that doesn't happen, abolish them.

Abolish them. Abolish them.

I mean put them in ... have people educated in the liberal arts, where at least they'll get a broad base of knowledge.

Unfortunately what they won't get, which the schools of ed do provide, and certainly provided in the 70's and the 80's much more so than today, is they offer, they take questions of pedagogy seriously.

You know, I mean that's a discipline; that's important; that's something that one has to learn.

You don't just learn a subject matter and then teach it, right?

You need theoretical traditions, you know.

You need the great educational philosophies.

You need to learn about Freire, Dewey, you know, the social Reconstructionists, the behaviorists.

I mean these are resources that have to be mobilized and brought to bear on what it means to take the classroom seriously.

Uh, thirdly, I think that teachers are going to have to begin mobilize.

They can't do this alone.

They can't sort of talk about engaging educational problems and closing the door and inventing a neat pedagogy that nobody knows about.

They're gonna have to work inside and outside the schools.

They're gonna have to force policy to be changed.

They're gonna have to vote people on boards who have power that represent what they're doing.

They're gonna have to fight for the power that they have.

They're gonna have to realize that education is not a method; it's the outcome of struggles.

It's not a method.

It's not some discourse that you simply invent and then apply.

It's in flux all the time, different conditions demand different interventions, and they're gonna have to understand that that question of difference is crucial.

Finally it seems to me, around the question of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, you know, these are incredibly important social issues that bear down on the schools in profoundly crucial ways, and they're relationship to what it means to link education to democracy has got to be taken seriously at every level, from how you build those things into the curriculum and talk about them with great care and inventiveness and critical engagement to what it means to have people in the classroom who are representative of the populations that we're dealing with, you know.

I mean I don't believe for one minute for instance, by way of qualification, that if I'm white and working class that I automatically have an insight into what it means to talk about working class culture.

I think that's nonsense.

I don't think it guarantees anything, but I think that the question of representation does matter.

I think that it's important for people to see people from their neighborhoods, you know, who are in the schools.

I think that it's important for people to have a wide representation of people who are seen as scholars and teachers and intellectuals.

I mean I don't think that, in a sense, whitewashing the profession does anything any good for anyone, except to reproduce in some ways the worst of racial stereotypes.

So I think all of these issues have to be taken up in ways that suggest that education is not only linked to questions democracy but it's part of our political and moral practice and culture that we really have to take seriously and engage.

It has to be situated in broader questions to be understood, and we have to do everything we can to fight the utterly technological instrumentalizing approach to education that now dominates, for instance, the Bush-Cheney regime.

No Child Left Behind?

GIROUX: I mean I think he'd be appalled I mean that anybody could dignify that bill with the presupposition that it really, really, actually either represents a progressive policy or has anything to do with forms of education that actually prepare people to not only live in the world but to understand it, engage it, and to transform it when necessary, you know.

I mean this is a bill that not only makes testing the modus operende of schooling.

In other words, it imposes a model on education that is fabulous for measuring the heights of trees, but has almost nothing to do with raising the most fundamental questions that drive education: Why are we there? What is knowledge for? How does it relate to democratic public life? What does it mean in terms of providing the conditions for forms of individual and social agency? How does it address questions of injustice? How does it make us better citizens? How does it close the gap between the poor and the rich? How does it prepare us for a global democracy?

These are questions that are absent from "no child left behind", and that absence is really what defines it.

Actually, that absence is so powerful, it so strips schooling of any kind of political and moral imperative that it renders it utterly instrumental, so education in this bill becomes an instrumentalized site.

It confuses the relationship between training and education, and, by doing that, it opts on the side of training.

But it does more, and I have to say this you know, it does more in that this is a bill that for instance gives the military the right to monitor schools and to get lists that would allow them to, in a sense, engage in recruiting policies for, what I consider to be at this point in history, an unjust war.

So...this is also a bill that rewards schools for imposing the most draconian kinds of disciplinary measures.

Schools get rewarded for zero tolerance policies. I mean, schools get rewarded for de-skilling teachers.

You know, schools get rewarded for cookie-cutter curriculums.

This is like stepping back into the stone ages.

This bill should be renamed: every child left behind.

But you know I want to say one last thing, this bill really is just symptomatic of something much larger, and what it's symptomatic of is an administration that really wants to do everything it can to undermine public education.

It hates public education.

It wants to either privatize it or commercialize it, and as far as its concerned - or turn it over, of course you know, to sectarian religious groups, right- who can then teach kids about the perils of sex education.

I mean this is a bill that wants once and for all to do away with the connection between education and democracy.

That's really what this bill is about.

This bill is a bill that wants to remove forever the premise that education could potentially be an invaluable, democratic, public sphere.

Race & Democratic Education

GIROUX: It's impossible to, in a sense, talk about democracy, schooling, education, racial justice, economics, immigration, the war on terror, without talking about race.

And what I basically mean by that is that it's so interwoven into the geography of power and inequality that it's fundamental to, basically, not just simply our history but what it means to take the promise of democracy seriously by, in a sense, arriving at that point where race is no longer part of the logic of inequality, injustice, and exploitation.

But I think at the same time, this question of race has entered a new phase, and it's not very healthy, in that, under the guise of neoliberalism, under the guise of the war on terror, we see two things happening.

First, under neoliberalism, public issues collapse into private considerations, so that now questions of racism are now translated into the language of prejudice, are translated into the language of individual attitudes, so the whole question of systemic racism gets eliminated as part of the language of politics.

We can't talk about institution of racism anymore because it doesn't exist, see?

'Cause it's really about you and me and about how we feel about each other, and how we have to work that out somehow.

That's a personal problem, right?

Which is all the more interesting, because as that happens at the same time you have a supreme court that's increasingly become overly racialized, in that you have people on that court who are doing everything that they can to abolish affirmative action, who are doing everything they can to roll back all the legislation that emerged out of the civil rights movement, right?

At the same time, in another part of the culture you have a conservative movement that is enormously powerful in attacking every public sphere it can around the question of racial justice.

I mean, for instance, the attack that's now going on in the universities, funded in part by the Olin Foundation and all of these foundations, who have an enormous interest in completely dismantling any vestige of affirmative action, but in a sense now use the language of victimization to do it.

Whites are being victimized, right? They have to learn about slavery, the legacy of slavery.

Lawyers now emerging out of right wing think tanks that are looking at every possible place to wage a legal battle against racial justice, going into universities, waging a battle against the universities around racial justice.

On the more militarized front, you have another battle taking place, and that battle is that in the urban centers today you have 33% of all people of color between the ages of eighteen and twenty four at some (I think it's eighteen and twenty eight) at some point in their life will be under the control of the criminal justice system.

70% are people of color.

You have a country that now wants to racially profile in ways that suggest that people of color are a pathology and a threat to the very notion of justice.

So you take all this together and what you have is a kind of Kew Klux Klan ethos without the hoods.

They don't have to wear the hoods anymore; now they wear ties, and they show up in the local courtroom, and they present arguments in ways that use the elaborate code, and they are so racist and so dangerous, and now they're part of, how do you say it? they're part of a society that sees them as in some way utterly right - No pun intended - and in some way representing what America is about.

This is a dire time in American history, and if race is an indicator of anything, it's an indicator of how close we're coming to authoritarianism.

Because remember, authoritarianism in its initial moments is always about racial purity.

Questioning Authoritarianism

GIROUX: Well, let's talk about it in a way in which we can immediately debunk one historical myth, and that is that fascism is entirely an historical issue.

You can't talk about fascism, because see that happened in the 1930's in Germany and Italy, and then it happened in the 1970's in Chile and Argentina, and it's over, and it's really an historical object.

The fact of the matter is that authoritarianism takes many forms, and while I would be the first to argue that anybody who says that the United States now resembles Nazi Germany is completely crazy, but anybody who says, wait a minute, there are elements of authoritarianism that are emerging in the United States, particularly kinds of fundamentalism, that have a similarity with forms of

authoritarianism in the past but also point to a new kind of authoritarianism, then I think we're onto something, and I think that what I would do for the sake of brevity is point to three fundamentalisms that it seems to me are moving us towards a new kind of American authoritarianism, one completely at odds with the most basic precepts of American democracy, right?

I mean first, it seems to me that you have a market driven economy, a market fundamentalism in which the template for measuring everything basically is how well it translates into profits.

You have a toothless citizenry now.

You have a citizenry that no longer realizes that the ritual of voting is not about the substance of democracy.

I mean, when you can get somebody like Tom Delay put it in your face and build in a million and a half dollars after a bill is passed for his oil cronies in Texas and there's no responsiveness.

When you can have a president who can basically lie and send young men and women to a war that we should never have been involved in.

When you have a government that flaunts what it means to, you know, tax the poor and eliminate taxes for the rich, and eliminate those legislative kind of rules that allow corporate power to become even more powerful, undermining the basis for democracy, something is wrong.

Secondly, you have an ongoing militarization of the public culture, and what I mean by that is that militarization has now become central to the national identity.

It's very dangerous because it seems to suggest that the only way in which we can deal with problems is through the mediation of force and military solutions, so rather than talk about political solutions, economic solutions, social solutions, all of a sudden we, for instance, criminalize policies that in the past were seen as something to be addressed by social services.

Homelessness, is that a problem that you treat by bringing in the police, who are enforcing ordinances that say that poor people can't ask for food so, therefore you know, you arrest them, you fine them, you put them in jail.

That's criminalizing a social policy.

You don't deal with students in schools who engaged in minor behavioral infractions by calling in the police to handcuff them, take them out, put them in a police car, because they violated a dress code.

That's the militarization of social policies.

When young women go to a hospital to have a blood test, and all of a sudden it's discovered that they have drugs in their blood, you don't then call the police and have the police come in with child services and take away their children.

You see, what you begin to see is the way in which this military police oriented model begins to shape every aspect of the culture.

Everything from fashion to a kind of, how do you say it, reality TV that actually merges neoliberalism and militarism, right?

Neoliberalism actually merges with a kind of militarism, a militaristic ideology, in which a certain kind of social Darwinism emerges in the culture that's actually ruthless.

I mean it cuts off and undercuts all kinds of forms of solidarity that matter, you know, where success is utterly predicated on your ability to control others rather than work with others, and you see it in the schools.

I mean you see it in all kinds of ways in which education rewards the brightest and the best.

You know there's no sense of how people come to work together.

You know when I grew up; when somebody was sick, the whole neighborhood would basically provide food.

People would be coming in and out of your apartment with... You had too much food.

I mean there'd be food on the table; could we do this, and could we do that, and it was just extraordinary, you know.

People would drive your kid to school if something happened.

There was a network of people that worked together, and when I got to school, I remember being in the second grade and I was sitting next to my friend Emilio. And we were having a test, and I pulled Emilio over, and I put my arm around him, and we were working together and the nun came running down from the front of the classroom, hit me in the back of the head, I think with an eraser, and all of a sudden gave me my first lesson: you never work together; you learn alone, and that's when school began for me.

And then the second great lesson was when I learned in history class that we never talk about the history of working class people.

We talk about the history of great people, and I always remember that. Brittle Brut???"Did Napoleon really cross into Russia alone?"

I mean all sense of social solidarity; all sense of collectivity kind of vanishes, right?

It's gone, but I think that what we see in this culture is a kind of hyper-violence and a kind of hyper-individualism.

People talk about gangster rap, you know.

They really got it wrong; it's a gangster culture.

You really want to talk about gangster rap, talk about corporate rip-offs.

You really want to talk about gangster rap, talk about Enron and billions out the window in one day because of greed.

That's gangsterism.

So it seems to me that you know...so, instead, what do we do?

We blame, allegedly, urban working class black kids for being gangsters.

Isn't this interesting?

When, in fact, the kind of cronyism and the kind of gangsterism that mocks the culture is so much more profoundly visible and yet ignored in other places.

This is the sign of a kind of fascism.

I get worried when I hear about people who, in fact, can be arrested in ways to suggest they don't have recourse to legal defenses, to lawyers.

They can be placed on ships off the coast of New York forever.

You can name people in a particular way and, hence, justify torture.

You can create a camp outside of the United States, you know, and claim that the people in this camp are somehow beyond the jurisdiction of US law.

See, democracy carries with it a great burden; it's the burden of its civilizing function.

Meaning that civic culture becomes a place where justice prevails, not torture, right?

Where power is distributed, not inequality.

Where people have access to the most basic goods to be able to survive.

Where social services are not dismantled.

Where no one should ever have to go bankrupt because of a health procedure.

45 million people in this country, in the United States, do not have health insurance.

On any given day it can be as high as 75 million.

You have 20% of all children in this country who live in poverty.

This is the richest country in the world.

How does that square with democracy, and what does it suggest, given the kind of tendencies I've just talked about, one of which I haven't mentioned, and the last one, which is religious fundamentalism.

The rise of a kind of Christian right, white, evangelicalism, that claims not only not only a biblical interpretation of the bible, not only gets enormous joy in what they call rapture politics, and that someday the Lord will come and we will be divested of our bodies and rise to Earth while everybody else suffers, right?

I mean what is this stuff?

I mean what is this?

I mean how else to explain this except that if you wanted to be crude you could call it a certain kind of derangement derangement, and a form of kind of idiocy, right?

Or you could say that there are tendencies in the culture that are now trying to collapse the line between state and religion in ways that allow the most authoritarian, not the most transformative and emancipatory, elements of religion to now gain ground, and to claim that, for instance, the gospel is really about the gospel of wealth, not about the gospel of sharing.

The Jesus who said "Follow me", you know, and "give up your money", you know, and "help the poor".

That Jesus is dead, I mean among the evangelicals.

That's not the Jesus they talk about.

The religion they talk about is a religion that looked the other way when the Jews were exterminated in Germany.

It's the religion that looked the other way when leftists disappeared in Argentina.

It's the religion that looked the other way and embodied a kind of bigotry and intolerance when people talked about the relationship between democracy and religious freedom.

And we have to be careful, this is not anti-religious rant; this is an argument for making religion compatible with democracy, which means that we take seriously the question of religious freedom based on a certain kind of tolerance for others.

Media Education

GIROUX: Well, I think that one of the things that has become enormously important to recognize is that education is not something that simply is about schooling, and when we recognize this it becomes clear that the educational force of the culture, itself: the media, newspapers, all kinds of places, computers, I mean you know places where electronic sort of labs where people get together and do chat rooms.

I mean it seems to me that what we have to recognize is that the kind of education, the most important kind of education that people are getting today is probably as a result of the wider culture, whether we want to call it media culture or popular culture.

I mean when it comes to shaping particular forms of knowledge, particular forms of identities, particular kinds of values, when it comes to sort of legitimating the relationship between knowledge and desire, when it comes to suggesting that the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism, when it comes to sort of relegating celebrity and moral culture, for instance, to the highest levels of human aspiration, you can't deny how powerful this is pedagogically.

I mean my argument is it represents a form of public pedagogy.

It's in the public realm, right?

And that it becomes, in a sense, a form of education, a form of pedagogy, that now becomes central to political culture.

Absolutely central in that in many ways you have a citizenry that's being educated for consent.

You have a citizenry that's being educated to define themselves in utterly narrow, market based terms as simply consumers.

You have a citizenry that is increasingly being led to believe that there's a link between terrorism and Iraq, you know?

You have a citizenry that seems to think that George bush is just a good old' boy, rather than a guy from the pinnacle of the ruling class, you know.

And so it goes on and on.

I mean I think that a lot of the work that often takes place in the culture today to define how people both understand themselves, their relationship to others, their relationship to the larger social order, and their relationship to the rest of the world globally is being incredibly mediated by, in a sense, a form of educational culture, a form of public pedagogy that often is not recognized for the pedagogical work that it actually does.

Let's talk about talk radio.

I mean let's talk about a guy like Rush Limbaugh, right? Who has an audience of 20 million.

I mean let's talk about Fox News.

Let's talk about these news organizations now and sitcoms and programs that actually shape, in some ways, some of the most basic assumptions about what matters in life, what kind of politics matter.

I mean talk radio reaches an enormous audience, and 95% of all talk radio is right wing.

Let's talk about the rising evangelical movement and its huge public media apparatus.

Let's talk about Clear Channel Communications, which has now, as a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, has something like 1500 radio stations, right?

They had 60 before the Telecommunications Act, so let's talk about the way in which this concentrated media, in a sense, now so narrowly limit the kinds of choices that people have in this image based culture that the kind of education that emerges from this culture is enormously undemocratic and limited.

Not that people don't mediate and not that people can't be critical, but it's hard to be critical when, in fact, the range of choices that you're provided with is so limited.

And, of course, this demands a recognition, not only that print culture is no longer the dominant culture, but it also suggests that we really need to take seriously two things.

One, we need to recognize that there are multiple literacies that now dominate the global social order. That it isn't enough to learn how to read books, right?

I mean you really have to learn how to read image-based technologies, you know?

You have to learn how to read the new media, but more importantly you need to learn how to produce from it.

I'm not interested in simply educating students to be able to read *Desperate Housewives* critically.

I mean I'm equally as interested in what it means for them to be cultural producers and to work in alternative public spheres so that that generation is not simply subject to *Desperate Housewives*, you know, or, you know, Fox News.

You know, that there are alternative examples that they can produce, particularly within a country where the concentration of media and the concentration of corporate power is so now intense that it's difficult to break in within and to sort of create pockets of resistance within those modalities, you know, those public spheres, right?

On Agency

GIROUX: I mean I think that the question of agency becomes meaningless unless you link it to the question of projects, because the question here has to be: the agency for what? Right?

So the first condition for me, the first issue for me is you can't have a democratic society without agents.

You can't do it, you know.

That agency is a condition for democracy, a particular kind of agency, and in this case it's the imperative of democracy that demands that we take the question of agency seriously.

What are the conditions that we need to construct that give full voice to the range of possibilities that will allow students to become agents in ways that suggest not only a form of self-empowerment but a form of social empowerment.

In other words, what kind of intellectual, what kind of social, experiential, value-based forms of learning allow people to not only experience a sense of agency but have a sense of how important it is if, in fact, their gonna be able to have some sort of understanding and impact on the world in which they live.

I mean, and this gets translated in a lot of ways.

I mean, you have to teach kids that knowledge matters, that there's a relationship between knowledge and power.

You have to respect the places from which they come, but you don't just stay there, right?

You have to make sure that they understand that being self-reflective is crucial to what it means to be an agent, the will to constantly question the things that we do, right?

You have to in some way recognize that you live in a world alone, that you sort of have to work in collective bodies with others, I mean, that there are social relationships that have to be taken seriously.

You have to in some way educate kids to believe that it's not enough to simply interpret the world.

You have to be able to inhabit a sense of agency that teaches us that you also have to be able to intervene in the world.

For that to happen, you have to have resources: intellectual, cultural, political.

I mean I don't even want to separate this question of agency from the most elemental sense of physicality, because I don't think you can be an agent if you don't have food in the morning.

I don't think you can be an agent if you live in a housing project where you have to worry about being beaten up every time you walk outside your door.

I don't think you can be an agent when all of a sudden you find that you don't have the money to buy the barest of necessities.

So being an agent is not just an educational issue, it's fundamentally an issue that links education to a whole range of larger social considerations.

That's why it's so important.

The War on Kids

GIROUX: You know we live in a world where we're at war with young people, and this has really never happened to the degree it's happened in the last fifteen to twenty years in the United States, because young people in the past actually became a symbol of the future, and we would look at our institutions and raise fundamental questions about what it meant to define those institutions in terms of what they would contribute for future generations to be able to deal with the future.

But now we live in a world in which young people, in a sense, really are the problem. They've become the problem because we don't think in terms of long-term solutions.

We only think now in terms of short term gains, and I think that what I trying to say is I think that young people are going to have to take this challenge very seriously, because it really is in their hands that the future of democracy is gonna unfold, and the stakes are high, and that they have to become politicized.

They have to organize.

They have to take education seriously.

They have to learn how to read the new media.

They have to in some way create a political language that gives them a voice.

They have to organize.

They have to develop social movements.

They have to reach beyond local and national boundaries.

They have to realize that this generational articulation is something that should bring them together in ways in which the future becomes the basis for shaping the very nature of their agency in the present.

Adults are not gonna do that for them, and, if anything, adults in many ways will do everything to prevent that from happening. And they have to wake up to this.

This is no longer a world in which the social supports that previous generations have, they no longer have the luxury of those supports.

So this is a terrible burden, but it's also a incredibly exciting challenge, and it seems to me they can do it and they have to learn how to do this.

This is gonna take hard work.

It's gonna mean stepping out of a popular culture that utterly debases them.

It's gonna mean reforming their schools.

It's gonna mean talking back.

They've gotta learn how to talk back.

Staying Unfinished

GIROUX: Well, I mean, I begin with the presupposition that unfinished means that we have never arrived at a point where everything that's to be done is completed.

That we are at the endpoint of democracy.

We're at the endpoint of justice.

We're at the endpoint of social struggle.

For me, democracy is a promise that is always unfulfilled, because I think the question that I ask myself is: do I live in a world that is just enough?

Is there enough justice?

And I find myself consistently answering that question in the negative: it's never just enough.

There is never enough justice.

So, at least in terms of the political project that's one answer.

The notion that the promise of democracy is as powerful as ever and represents an ideal to be struggled for, suggest a kind of unfinished quality, right?

On a more existential level, I could never understand how anybody could think they're finished, and I mean finished in two senses.

I mean finished in the sense of believing that you know so much that there's nothing more to learn from others, that there isn't other places to go, you know, there aren't new ways to be reflective about the world you live in.

Or to be finished in the most destructive sense, which is to believe that you no longer have any hope that the world is a place that should be struggled over, and so to be finished by withdrawing into a world so cynical that you've finished yourself off as an agent.

I think that we need to consistently search and find ways to bring joy into our lives.

You know, joy that sustains us and keeps us going.

I think unfinished in that any relationship we're in that matters, whether you're living with somebody, whether you have children, or whether you're the closest of intimates or relations.

Those relationships are always unfinished; they always have to be struggled over.

You can never take them for granted.

I mean, unfinished means you have to work on the world, as opposed to presupposing you can withdraw from it and just allow it to work on you and not to have to be reflective or concerned about that.

Struggling for the Future

GIROUX: To talk about the future is, in a sense for me, to recognize that I don't want to see a future that simply reproduces the present, so the future becomes a way of imagining otherwise and, hopefully, acting otherwise, but that future is not guaranteed.

I mean I can't see it in ways to suggest that, I mean there are premonitions.

I mean there are certain tendencies that you can't ignore.

It's clear that, for instance, if we continue on the current path it might be surprising if the world is still here.

I mean the environment is being destroyed at such an incredibly rapid level that, you know, who's to say, right?

Starvation, I mean all the kinds of problems that I think are right on the horizon, I am just praying somehow these problems can be contained, so that the future doesn't look as bleak as it appears to me, but at the same time, I realize that history is the struggles. People struggle, you know.

I don't wanna romanticize this by saying I have no ideas or who knows, but I wanna as much as I wanna say there's a certain social gravity that we have to assign to the conditions in which we find ourselves.

They point to a certain direction and, unless things change, the future looks bleak.

Very, very bleak in my eyes.

But at the same time, I'm enough of an optimist to believe that people often rise to the occasion and struggle and do the best they can, particularly in the face of emergencies, and I think that we have reached a crisis point particularly in the United States around what it means to salvage democracy, what it means to salvage the planet, what it means to take the social contract seriously, and what it means to live in a world in which we just simply can't dictate to the rest of the world a form of democracy that's always accompanied by bombs and planes and soldiers.

So I think we're at a kind of turning point, and I think it's in that notion of the turning point I think there is something relatively problematic that can't be actually put into a recipe.

The real question here is how do you create a future that doesn't simply reproduce a present that in fact might eliminate the future.

That seems to be the modality for me that I would probably take most seriously.

[END]