

Academic Dissent in America. The Political and Social Crisis in the U.S.

American students are educated to be consumers

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American philosopher and cultural critic Henry A. Giroux believes that under the influence of the government, the higher education system in the United States has moved toward silencing progressive and alternative voices which try to challenge the U.S. militarism and its expansionistic policies. He also believes that the American students are not trained to be critical thinkers.

"I think many students are weary of America's expansionist policies but there is not enough dissent among college students over such policies at the present time to actually challenge them. Many American students are educated largely to be consumers not critical thinkers and those who do escape the strangulating grip of a poisonous market driven neo-liberalism are suffering under the burden of debt while facing a future in which they will be underemployed or unemployed," said Prof. Giroux in an exclusive interview with Tehran Times conducted last week.

Prof. Henry A. Giroux is a cultural critic and one of the founding theorists of critical pedagogy who is best known for his contributions to cultural studies, youth studies, higher education and critical theory.

Seven books written by Giroux have been chosen as significant books of the year by the "American Educational Studies Association." He has authored 33 books the latest of which is "Twilight of the Social: Resurgent Publics in the Age of Disposability" which was published in 2012.

He has served as the Director of the Waterbury Forum in Education and Cultural Studies. He moved to McMaster University in May 2004, where he currently holds the Global Television Network Chair in English and Cultural Studies and currently runs the Public Intellectual project. Giroux is also a member of Truthout's Board of Directors.

What follows is the text of Tehran Times' interview with Prof. Giroux.

Q: What the majority of people around the world have heard about the United States is that it is a beacon of freedom in which everybody, is free to express his viewpoints, even if that certain viewpoint is not much favorable according to the mainstream discourse. What's the reality? Are the leftist professors in the universities, for example, really free to express their unconventional opinions, in such cases as the special Israeli-American relationship, or other similar matters?

A: Academic dissent has been under attack for a long time in the United States. Its more

notable moments came in the 1920s, the 1950s, and more recently after 9/11. What is new is that right wing elite, religious fundamentalists, and corporate groups have changed their strategy in limiting dissent. Instead of simply attacking, firing, and shaming intellectuals who criticize mainstream policies such as the Israeli-American relations—though that still happens—the more sophisticated approach is to prevent such intellectuals from getting tenure, influencing who gets hired, and finding ways to actually shape what is taught in the classroom.

For instance, some major donors are now demanding that particular books be read in classes. In one case, a donor demanded that Ayn Rand's right wing book, "*Atlas Shrugged*," be required reading in the class. In other cases, billionaire and mega corporate donors are trying to shape curriculum and hiring procedures as part of their gifts to higher education. This is not simply reactionary but undermines every noble principle that education embodies.

The other strategy is to increase the number of non-tenured professors in the profession so as to not only make them powerless in setting policy but also to keep them suspended in a state of fear over what they say in order not to jeopardize their paltry paying jobs. Over 70 percent of academics in higher education is either on a non-tenured track or is hired part-time. This is a form of indentured labor that undercuts a culture of questioning, dissent, and makes a joke out of academic freedom. As higher education becomes more expensive, corporatized, and devalued as a social good, there is also less and less room to teach subjects or create and sustain academic fields not tied directly to occupational training. In this instance, training is substituted for any viable form of critical education and the formative culture necessary for an educated citizenry withers.

Q: What do the new generation of American students and the foreign students who come to the United States for pursuing their studies, think about the U.S. foreign policy? Has the academia begun to challenge the American militarism, its hegemony and expansionistic policies? Does debate on such subjects take place in the American universities smoothly?

A: I think many students are weary of America's expansionist policies but there is not enough dissent among college students over such policies at the present time to actually challenge them. Many American students are educated largely to be consumers not critical thinkers and those who do escape the strangulating grip of a poisonous market driven neo-liberalism are suffering under the burden of debt while facing a future in which they will be underemployed or unemployed. The present bears down on many American students as a burden as inequality and social disparities grow day by day. America has become the land of downward mobility for an entire generation of young people and not simply for a few. Under such circumstances, time becomes a burden and dissent a luxury, though within the last few years dissent has been growing. This movement is promising, but it does not have the reach and scope to make a real difference in power and control by the rich, mega corporations and financial elite. But its success remains to be tested.

Q: One of your perennial concerns, as reflected in your writings, has been social injustice. The United States last year witnessed the most unprecedented nationwide protests at the growing rift between the rich and poor and the social inequality in the framework of the Occupy Wall Street movement. What do you think about this movement and its achievements? Has it realized the objectives it was pursuing from the outset?

A: I think many young people in the Occupy Movement are changing the nature of the public conversation about politics, power, pedagogy, and hope. Young people are rejecting a future of debt, a society dominated by market values, militarism, a survival of the fittest ethic, and finance capital.

What they have made clear is that in order for democracy to become meaningful, all citizens, old and young, should be equally entitled, if not equally empowered, to shape the society in which they live. This is a message we heard from the brave students fighting tuition hikes and the destruction of civil liberties and social provisions in the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Wall Street Movement has already won a decisive battle in producing a new language for how to talk about inequality, class and racial injustice, and the shape of a real democracy. For such a movement to succeed, progressives, educators, workers, middle-class professionals, and others need listen to the Wall Street Movement and young people all over the world who are insisting that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what they say and do counts in their struggle to unlearn dominating privileges, productively reconstruct their relations with others, and transform, when necessary, the world around them. More importantly, they need to join students in engaging in a practice of freedom that points to new and radical forms of pedagogies that have a direct link to building social movements in and out of the colleges and universities.

Q: What's your analysis of the popular uprisings in the Arab countries of the Middle East? The whole scenario started with a Tunisian street vendor putting himself on fire in protest at the humiliation he had suffered, and the economic difficulties he and his family were subject to. Then the protests were extended to the rest of Arab world and engulfed the whole Middle East. Can we interpret these upheavals in the light of a set of revolutions aimed at realizing confiscated political, social and economic rights?

A: All of these protests emerge out of different religious, economic, political, and historical situations. What they have in common is the demand for an expansion of religious, social, political, and personal rights. They collectively signify a historical watershed in which the burning desire for democracy can no longer be contained. Young people, as a result of the new electronic and screen technologies, have immediate access to modes of knowledge, values, and social relations that point to the possibility of a future free of economic, political, and social injustice. Ideas can no longer be contained as they were under modernity. Borders are collapsing in the symbolic sense, knowledge flows, passions bleed into different bodies, public spheres, populations, and nations. Domination and domestic state terrorism can no longer isolate itself from the rest of the world. Democracy can no longer be contained, hidden behind walls, and contained by real and symbolic weapons of mass destruction. Democracy has become an aphrodisiac and tonic merging passion and a kind of wakefulness to the possibility of a new future, a new life, and new hopes.

Q: In your writings, you've spoken of the concept of economic Darwinism and called it one of the root causes of unbridled individualism which leads to the erosion of social responsibility, public values and community. Would you please share with us your insight on this concept and the impact it has had on the American lives?

A: Social Darwinism is the value system that drives the American economy. It is an ethic dominated by a war against all ethos which celebrates a radical individualism, extreme form of competitiveness, and separates actions from moral considerations. It is a poisonous worldview that views politics as an extension of war. In essence it is a form of domestic

terrorism. It is a form of terrorism because it abstracts economics from ethics and social costs, makes a mockery of democracy, works to dismantle the welfare state, thrives on militarization, undermines any public sphere not governed by market values, and transforms people into commodities. Neo-liberalism's rigid emphasis on unfettered individualism, competitiveness and flexibility displaces compassion, sharing and a concern for the welfare of others. In doing so, it dissolves crucial social bonds and undermines the profound nature of social responsibility and its ensuing concern for others. In removing individuals from broader social obligations, it not only tears up social solidarities, it also promotes a kind of individualism that is almost pathological in its disdain for public goods, community, social provisions, and public values. Given its tendency to instrumentalize knowledge, it exhibits mistrust for thoughtfulness, complexity, and critical dialogue and in doing so contributes to a culture of stupidity and cruelty in which the dominant ethic is organized around the discourse of war and a survival of the fittest mentality. Neo-liberalism is the antithesis of democracy.

The consequences of this worldview are everywhere in American society. Deregulation, privatization, atomization, and commodification now rule American institutions turning over the commanding heights of power to mega corporations, the defense industry, and ideological fundamentalists. America is a hugely rich country marked by massive poverty, inequality in wealth and income, and a political system controlled by big money. Its cultural apparatuses are controlled by mega corporations and its political system is now largely controlled by the apostles of finance and militarism. It is a country that is on the brink of a very dark historical period in which the winds of authoritarianism are posed to destroy all remnants of a claim to democracy.

Q: What do you think about the function of the multinational corporate media, their interests and their long-term objectives? Is it possible to have a sincere and ethical journalism while there are certain people in the power hierarchy who specify the direction and set the policies of the mainstream media?

A: A democracy cannot survive without a formative culture to support it. That culture is shaped in the commanding educational apparatuses in which knowledge is produced and subjects and identities are constructed. The mainstream media in the U.S. is largely controlled by 5 mega corporations that have abandoned their responsibility to act as a fourth estate, to make power accountable and offer critical analyses of American foreign and domestic policy. Instead, we have a mainstream media that trades in either an endless commercial bombardment of the American public, raises an insipid celebratory culture to the status of a state religion, and substitutes the obligations of real citizenship for the demands of consumerism and shopping. On the other hand, the new media is increasingly providing new public spaces for oppositional voices to be heard from a wide variety of sources, ranging from students and teachers to labor organizers and a range of new public intellectuals. There is no hope for the mainstream media. It has sold its soul to the market place and has largely become an inept source of legitimation for corporate and political sovereignty.

Q: What's your viewpoint regarding the gradual decline of the U.S. imperial power and the weakening of its political, economic hegemony over the developing world? It seems that such countries as Brazil, China and Russia are emerging as serious contenders of the American economy and political power. Would you please share your viewpoint on that with us?

A: There are many other people who can speak to this issue more forcefully than I can. I am thinking particularly of Noam Chomsky, Andrew Bacevich, and Glenn Greenwald, among others. But what is clear is the U.S. is now facing a political and economic challenge unlike anything it has faced in the past. Politics is now local and power is global and that means that the U.S. has no way to challenge, within the usual rules, the power of multinational corporations that now write the rules for domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, this power is global and has no allegiance to the nation state except to use it to further its own financial interests. Hence, the full-fledged attack on the welfare state, women, minorities of class and color, public servants, and the institutions that do not buy completely into market driven values. As the power of the state crumbles, the state is reconfigured largely as a punishing state used increasingly to criminalize the behavior of those caught in dire social problems such as homelessness, debt servitude, unemployment, poverty, and various disabilities. Moreover, the model of the prison and its culture are seeping and spreading into schools where young people are now arrested for trivial behaviors such as dress code violations. How can a country that substitutes prisons for schools, revels in a culture of massive inequality and cruelty, and arrests huge numbers of its citizens make any claim on the future or for that matter even have one?

Q: And finally, what's your prediction for President Obama's upcoming second term? Will he yield to the pressures by Israeli lobby and comply with their demands in such cases as a possible military strike against Iran, the continued blockade of the Gaza Strip and settlement constructions, etc? Is there any way for Obama to evade being pushed by Israel?

A: One would hope that Obama would show some courage in his second term and rule according to the precepts of justice rather than political pragmatism. I think that it is important to note that during his first time Obama moved the United States closer to the dictates of an authoritarian state. He initiated the National Defense Authorization Act, which allows him to kidnap and hold indefinitely without judicial rights anyone deemed a terrorist (a vague and abusive term); he has implanted targeted assassinations, which has included at least two American citizens living abroad; he has implemented what might be called an unaccountable surveillance state, and he has expanded the use of sinister drones to conduct a new and more ruthless type of warfare, which more often than not has resulted in the needless killing of innocent civilians. Obama has helped to create a Golden Age for executioners, revealing the grisly and gruesome side of state power committed to death through the use of cold, calculating machines run by automatons. Obama is not a liberal. He is not even progressive, but a conservative centrist who leans heavily towards the extremist elements in the Republican Party. He is inflexible around Israel's repressive policies towards Palestinians and he has done nothing to address what it would mean to bring peace to the region.

But change is not made by people in power. It is often made by people in the streets. It is made by social movements who refuse to become the excess, disappeared, and disposable populations produced by authoritarian regimes. I am not optimistic but at the same time history is open and I would hope that as the Occupy Movement and other progressive social movements develop in the U.S. under the strain of severe political and economic conditions that Obama may find his footing and exhibit the kind of moral and political courage that is necessary to dismantle the allegiance to militarism that now characterizes its expansionist policies.

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