Book Review: *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*

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As sensed from the title of his book, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, Henry Giroux (2014) frames neoliberal governance, or plutocrats, as "parasites" (p. 9)—not only on education, but also on society at large. While Giroux's tone and language do not shy away from personal opinion, he draws on examples from public policy, governance, politics, pedagogy, and government spending to ground his primary argument. His thesis places economic Darwinism as the guiding force for neoliberal policies that promote "utilitarian individualism" (Fowler, 2013, p. 95) and privatization while devaluing social, moral, and economic justice. Utilizing the critical theories for which he is known in other works, Giroux convincingly provides examples of the neoliberal ideologies rampant in higher education (HE); however, he insufficiently, though understandably given the nature of utilizing critical theory, provides solutions for how educators can rediscover or promote democratic governance. This review provides a brief summary of the book, an analysis of the arguments grounded by other works, and a reader recommendation.

Summary

Giroux (2014) provides a foundation for his writing by sharing his assumptions, values, and definitions regarding the role of HE. Although he does not call for a realization of past ideals, he does hope that educators will begin to "reclaim elements of a history in which the discourses of critique and possibility offered an alternative vision of what form [HE] might take in a substantive democratic society" (p. 139). Increasingly being viewed by the public as an individual, privileged, and private right as opposed to a public good, HE is losing its appeal as a place for the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Giroux (2014) considers a number of issues facing HE that influence neoliberal ideologies: "low funding, the domination of universities by market mechanisms, the rise of for-profit colleges, the intrusion of the national security state, and the lack of faculty self-governance" (p. 138). The disinvestment in public universities and an investment in for-profit universities, as well as the unequal distribution of federal funding (with only 6% being allocated to education, whereas 60% goes to military spending) reflect a few examples of these issues (Giroux, 2014).

The most prominent implications of this institutional paradigmatic shift toward market values, among many discussed throughout the book, include the undermining of civic education and public values, the rise of big sports, the standardization of educational reform, the confusion of "education with training…[and the notion of] students as consumers" (Giroux, 2014, p. 68), and "faculty as entrepreneurs" (p. 30). These concerns reflect some of Giroux's main arguments—that the ever-increasing inequality of wealth, and ultimately the

educational opportunity gap, has led to "the undoing of the American dream into an American nightmare" (p. 132). Among other proposals, Giroux suggests that academics and the pedagogy they implement have not only a role in, but an ethical responsibility for, unsettling such neoliberal orthodoxies.

Analysis

The previous summary cannot do justice to Giroux's (2014) historical authentic interest in and personal liability for (revealed in the final chapter's interview) shining a critical light on HE driven by economic ideologies. And even though Giroux appears to recognize the unvaried nature of his claims when he states, "At the risk of being repetitious…" (p. 134) and "As I have mentioned throughout this book…" (p. 137), a number of themes discussed below clearly emerge from the book.

A general critique of the book, recognized early on in the read, is that given Giroux's ability to capture the essence of the neoliberal agendas infused within HE, there is often a lack of composing causal arguments and practical solutions. For instance, in chapter four, Giroux (2014) outlines the dangerous power of athletics in undermining the "liberal values of critical thinking" (p. 112) and encouraging, although not explicitly stated as a result of, the increase of sexual violence on college campuses. In chapter five, Giroux focuses his attention on the impact of neoliberal ideologies on faculty members. Viewed by Giroux as another example of economic values inherent in HE governance, institutions increasingly support part-time and adjunct faculty members as opposed to full-time, tenured ones; however, faculty members oftentimes actually contribute to a commodified and standardized academy when viewed through the lens of neo-institutionalism (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014). Individualistic values, encouraged by an institutional ranking regime, promote prestige, isolation, and personal scholarship among faculty while devaluing *collaboration* and k*nowledge sharing*—two vital characteristics needed for faculty and educators alike to lead in a culture of neoliberal change (Fullan, 2001; Gonzales & Núñez, 2014).

In addressing this need for change, Giroux (2014) posits that students and faculty should be active policy enforcers. Unfortunately, in light of the examples already provided, a number of factors influence faculty members' lack of interest in combating economic ideologies and in expanding their roles. In the face of academic freedom and job-driven curricula, "intellectuals who engage in dissent" or view education as a public good "are often dismissed as irrelevant, extremist, elitist, or un-American" (p. 141). As for students, engaging in acts that influence the defining of policy issues, and ultimately the agenda which sets policy, is a foreign concept to them given the inculcation of a notion that HE "neither serves a public good nor is a valuable democratic public sphere" (p. 64). How much more deflating can such a pervasively negative ideology be for acts of self-driven advocacy? By encouraging agency among stakeholders in HE, while at the same time recognizing the difficulties in doing so, Giroux leaves readers with an uneasy, questioning, almost hopeless sense that resolutions can be found. This difficulty in offering applicable solutions is often a critique

of using critical theory, which is Giroux's main framework. Despite this disheartening sentiment, Giroux effectively identifies the dominant neoliberal ideologies found in HE, scrutinizes ideas, reveals potential rationales behind those ideas, and attempts to develop "alternative forms of understanding and point to concrete possibilities for action" (Friesen, 2008, p. 4) through his immanent critique. Understandably, the resolutions sought are not easily identifiable nor can they be practically and successfully addressed by one particular agenda item. By focusing on the grassroots level, Giroux (2014) begins to acknowledge the need for educational leaders to engage "students as students, rather than as consumers or even criminals" (p. 118). If neoliberal agendas remain problems that are unreachable or constantly theorized and complained about, leaders begin to "separate individual problems and experience from public issues and social considerations" (p. 46). Grassroots policy not only places agency in the hands of faculty and students, but it also redirects the attention to and expectation of HE institutions "to focus their work on important social issues that connect what is learned in the classroom to the larger society and the lives of their students" (p. 40). By addressing issues on a practical level, while recognizing their broader implications, Giroux provides a glimmer of hope for agenda setting momentum because, with agency, comes action.

Recommendation

Giroux (2014) presents a disconcerting amount of issues prevalent in HE, as a result of neoliberal, economic, and market-driven agendas. Although readers will not finish this book with a list of concrete solutions, the underlying message for educational leaders to take responsibility for their responsibilities is nothing less than empowering. Despite impeding barriers including the debates about academic freedom, the input by critics of political correctness, and the ubiquitous commodified ideologies of HE, leaders have a responsibility to "generate controversy…[raise] political awareness…[and make] connections to those elements of power and politics often hidden from public view" (p. 149). Although Giroux outlines both the causes and symptoms of neoliberal agendas prevalent in HE, and provides an overview of and evidence for their implications, his main goal appears to be one of providing ammunition for addressing these agendas rather than providing solutions for them. This is a commendable effort, however, given that neoliberal biases are "much easier to recognize, address, and combat when [they are] overt and blatant" (Park, 2011, p. 231). Most importantly, if you are already familiar with both the systemic rationale for and evidence of such neoliberal agendas, Giroux adds—covertly and perhaps purposefully—a much needed call for political activism by HE stakeholders which requires more than this sense of awareness.

References

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