
The Language of Neoliberal Education

An Interview with Henry Giroux

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primary research areas are: cultural studies, youth studies, critical pedagogy, popular culture, media studies, social theory, and the politics of higher and public education. He is particularly interested in what he calls the war on youth, the corporatization of higher education, the politics of neoliberalism, the assault on civic literacy and the collapse of public memory, public pedagogy, the educative nature of politics, and the rise of various youth movements across the globe. His website can be found at www.henryagiroux.com.

For several decades now, neoliberalism has been at the forefront of discussions not only in the economy and finance but has infiltrated our vocabulary in a number of areas as diverse as governance studies, criminology, health care, jurisprudence, education etc. What has triggered the use and application of this 'economistic' ideology associated with the promotion of effectiveness and efficiency?

Neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of the times and has established itself as a central feature of politics. Not only does it define itself as a political and economic system whose aim was to consolidate power in the hands of a corporate and financial elite, it also wages a war over ideas. In this instance, it has defined itself as a form of commonsense and functions as a mode of public pedagogy that produces a template for structuring not just markets but all of social life. In this sense, it has and continues to function not only through public and higher education to produce and distribute market-based values, identities, and modes of agency, but also in wider cultural apparatuses and platforms to privatize, deregulate, economize, and subject all of the commanding institutions and relations of everyday life to the dictates of privatization, efficiency, deregulation, and commodification.

Since the 1970s as more and more of the commanding institutions of society come under the control of neoliberal ideology, its notions of common sense – an unchecked individualism, harsh competition, an aggressive attack on the welfare state, the evisceration of public goods, and its attack on all models of sociality at odds with market values – have become the reigning hegemony of capitalist societies. What many on the left have failed to realize is that neoliberalism is about more than economic structures, it is also a powerful pedagogical force – especially in the era of social media – that engages in full-spectrum dominance at every level of civil society. Its reach extends not only into education but also among an array of digital platforms as well as in the broader sphere of popular culture.

Under neoliberal modes of governance, regardless of the institution, every social relation is reduced to an act of commerce. Neoliberalism's promotion of effectiveness and efficiency gives credence to its ability to willingness and success in making education central to politics. It also offers a warning to progressives, as Pierre Bourdieu has insisted that the left has underestimated the symbolic and pedagogical dimensions of struggle and have not always forged appropriate weapons to fight on this front."

According to the advocates of neoliberalism, education represents one of the main indicators of future economic growth and individual well-being. How – and why – education became one of the central elements of the 'neoliberal revolution'?

Advocates of neoliberalism have always recognized that education is a site of struggle over which there are very high stakes regarding how young people are educated, who is to be educated, and what vision of the present and future should be most valued and privileged. Higher education in the sixties went through a revolutionary period in the United States and many other countries as students sought to both redefine education as a democratic public sphere and to open it up to a variety of groups that up to that point had been excluded. Conservatives were extremely frightened over this shift and did everything they could to counter it. Evidence of this is clear in the production of the Powell Memo published in 1971 and later in The Trilateral Commission's book-length report, namely, *The Crisis of Democracy*, published in 1975. From the 1960s on the, conservatives, especially the neoliberal right, has waged a war on education in order to rid it of its potential role as a democratic public sphere. At the same time, they sought aggressively to restructure its modes of governance, undercut the power of faculty, privilege knowledge that was instrumental to the market, define students mainly as clients and consumers, and reduce the function of higher education largely to training students for the global workforce. At the core of the neoliberal investment in education is a desire to undermine the university's commitment to the truth, critical thinking, and its obligation to stand for justice and assume responsibility for safeguarding the interests of young as they enter a world marked massive inequalities, exclusion, and violence at home and abroad. Higher education may be one of the few institutions left in neoliberal societies that offers a protective space to question, challenge, and think against the grain. Neoliberalism considers such a space to be dangerous and they have done everything possible to eliminate higher education as a space where students can realize themselves as critical citizens, faculty can participate in

the governing structure, and education can be define itself as a right rather than as a privilege.

Almost by definition, reforms and other initiatives aimed to improve educational practice have been one of the pivotal mechanisms to infiltrate the neoliberal agenda of effectiveness and efficiency. What aspect of neoliberalism and its educational agenda you find most problematic? Why?

Increasingly aligned with market forces, higher education is mostly primed for teaching business principles and corporate values, while university administrators are prized as CEOs or bureaucrats in a neoliberal-based audit culture. Many colleges and universities have been McDonalds-ized as knowledge is increasingly viewed as a commodity resulting in curricula that resemble a fast-food menu. In addition, faculty are subjected increasingly to a Wal-Mart model of labor relations designed as Noam Chomsky points out “to reduce labor costs and to increase labor servility”. In the age of precarity and flexibility, the majority of faculty have been reduced to part-time positions, subjected to low wages, lost control over the conditions of their labor, suffered reduced benefits, and frightened about addressing social issues critically in their classrooms for fear of losing their jobs. The latter may be the central issue curbing free speech and academic freedom in the academy. Moreover, many of these faculty are barely able to make ends meet because of their impoverished salaries, and some are on food stamps. If faculty are treated like service workers, students fare no better and are now relegated to the status of customers and clients. Moreover, they are not only inundated with the competitive, privatized, and market-driven values of neoliberalism, they are also punished by those values in the form of exorbitant tuition rates, astronomical debts owed to banks and other financial institutions, and in too many cases a lack of meaningful employment. As a project and movement, neoliberalism undermines the ability of educators and others to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and the civic courage necessary to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical. As an ideology, neoliberalism is at odds with any viable notion of democracy which it sees as the enemy of the market. Yet, Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, curious, reflective, and independent – qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform, and governmental policy.

Why large-scale assessments and quantitative data in general are a central part of the 'neo-liberal toolkit' in educational research?

These are the tools of accountants and have nothing to do with larger visions or questions about what matters as part of a university education. The overreliance on metrics and measurement has become a tool used to remove questions of responsibility, morality, and justice from the language and policies of education. I believe the neoliberal toolkit as you put it is part of the discourse of civic illiteracy that now runs rampant in higher educational research, a kind of mind-numbing investment in a metric-based culture that kills the imagination and wages an assault on what it means to be critical, thoughtful, daring, and willing to take risks. Metrics in the service of an audit culture has become the new face of a culture of positivism, a kind of empirical-based panopticon that turns ideas into numbers and the creative impulse into ashes. Large scale assessments and quantitative data are the driving mechanisms in which everything is absorbed into the culture of business. The distinction between information and knowledge has become irrelevant in this model and anything that cannot be captured by numbers is treated with disdain. In this new audit panopticon, the only knowledge that matters is that which can be measured. What is missed here, of course, is that measurable utility is a curse as a universal principle because it ignores any form of knowledge based on the assumption that individuals need to know more than how things work or what their practical utility might be. This is a language that cannot answer the question of what the responsibility of the university and educators might be in a time of tyranny, in the face of the unspeakable, and the current widespread attack on immigrants, Muslims, and others considered disposable. This is a language that is both afraid and unwilling to imagine what alternative worlds inspired by the search for equality and justice might be possible in an age beset by the increasing dark forces of authoritarianism.

While the analysis of the neoliberal agenda in education is well documented, the analysis of the language of neoliberal education is at the fringes of scholarly interest. In particular, the expansion of the neoliberal vocabulary with egalitarian ideas such as fairness, justice, equality of opportunity, well-being etc. has received [at best] only limited attention. What factors have contributed to this shift of emphasis?

Neoliberalism has upended how language is used in both education and the wider society. It works to appropriate discourses associated with

liberal democracy that have become normalized in order to both limit their meanings and use them to mean the opposite of what they have meant traditionally, especially with respect to human rights, justice, informed judgment, critical agency, and democracy itself. It is waging a war over not just the relationship between economic structures but over memory, words, meaning, and politics. Neoliberalism takes words like freedom and limits it to the freedom to consume, spew out hate, and celebrate notions of self-interest and a rabid individualism as the new common sense. Equality of opportunity means engaging in ruthless forms of competition, a war of all against all ethos, and a survival of the fittest mode of behavior. The vocabulary of neoliberalism operates in the service of violence in that it reduces the capacity for human fulfillment in the collective sense, diminishes a broad understanding of freedom as fundamental to expanding the capacity for human agency, and diminishes the ethical imagination by reducing it to the interest of the market and the accumulation of capital. Words, memory, language and meaning are weaponized under neoliberalism. Certainly, neither the media nor progressives have given enough attention to how neoliberalism colonizes language because neither group has given enough attention to viewing the crisis of neoliberalism as not only an economic crisis but also a crisis of ideas. Education is not viewed as a force central to politics and as such the intersection of language, power, and politics in the neoliberal paradigm has been largely ignored. Moreover, at a time when civic culture is being eradicated, public spheres are vanishing, and notions of shared citizenship appear obsolete, words that speak to the truth, reveal injustices and provide informed critical analysis also begin to disappear. This makes it all the more difficult to engage critically the use of neoliberalism's colonization of language. In the United States, Trump prodigious tweets signify not only a time in which governments engage in the pathology of endless fabrications, but also how they function to reinforce a pedagogy of infantilism designed to animate his base in a glut of shock while reinforcing a culture of war, fear, divisiveness, and greed in ways that disempower his critics.

You have written extensively on neoliberalism's exclusively instrumental view of education, its reductionist understanding of effectiveness and its distorted image of fairness. In what way should radical pedagogy fight back neoliberalism and its educational agenda?

First, higher education needs to reassert its mission as a public good in order to reclaim its egalitarian and democratic impulses. Educators need to

initiate and expand a national conversation in which higher education can be defended as a democratic public sphere and the classroom as a site of deliberative inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking, a site that makes a claim on the radical imagination and a sense of civic courage. At the same time, the discourse on defining higher education as a democratic public sphere can provide the platform for a more expressive commitment in developing a social movement in defense of public goods and against neoliberalism as a threat to democracy. This also means rethinking how education can be funded as a public good and what it might mean to fight for policies that both stop the defunding of education and fight to relocate funds from the death dealing military and incarceration budgets to those supporting education at all levels of society. The challenge here is for higher education not to abandon its commitment to democracy and to recognize that neoliberalism operates in the service of the forces of economic domination and ideological repression. Second, educators need to acknowledge and make good on the claim that a critically literate citizen is indispensable to a democracy, especially at a time when higher education is being privatized and subject to neoliberal restructuring efforts. This suggests placing ethics, civic literacy, social responsibility, and compassion at the forefront of learning so as to combine knowledge, teaching, and research with the rudiments of what might be called the grammar of an ethical and social imagination. This would imply taking seriously those values, traditions, histories, and pedagogies that would promote a sense of dignity, self-reflection, and compassion at the heart of a real democracy. Third, higher education needs to be viewed as a right, as it is in many countries such as Germany, France, Norway, Finland, and Brazil, rather than a privilege for a limited few, as it is in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Fourth, in a world driven by data, metrics, and the replacement of knowledge by the overabundance of information, educators need to enable students to engage in multiple literacies extending from print and visual culture to digital culture. They need to become border crossers who can think dialectically, and learn not only how to consume culture but also to produce it. Fifth, faculty must reclaim their right to control over the nature of their labor, shape policies of governance, and be given tenure track lines with the guarantee of secure employment and protection for academic freedom and free speech.

Why is it important to analyze the relationship between neoliberalism and civic literacy particularly as an educational project?

The ascendancy of neoliberalism in American politics has made visible a plague of deep-seated civic illiteracy, a corrupt political system and a

contempt for reason that has been decades in the making. It also points to the withering of civic attachments, the undoing of civic culture, the decline of public life and the erosion of any sense of shared citizenship. As market mentalities and moralities tighten their grip on all aspects of society, democratic institutions and public spheres are being downsized, if not altogether disappearing. As these institutions vanish – from public schools and alternative media to health care centers– there is also a serious erosion of the discourse of community, justice, equality, public values, and the common good. At the same time reason and truth are not simply contested, or the subject of informed arguments as they should be, but wrongly vilified – banished to Trump’s poisonous world of fake news. For instance, under the Trump administration, language has been pillaged, truth and reason disparaged, and words and phrases emptied of any substance or turned into their opposite, all via the endless production of Trump’s Twitter storms and the ongoing clown spectacle of Fox News. This grim reality points to a failure in the power of the civic imagination, political will, and open democracy. It is also part of a politics that strips the social of any democratic ideals and undermines any understanding of education as a public good. What we are witnessing under neoliberalism is not simply a political project to consolidate power in the hands of the corporate and financial elite but also a reworking of the very meaning of literacy and education as crucial to what it means to create an informed citizenry and democratic society. In an age when literacy and thinking become dangerous to the anti-democratic forces governing all the commanding economic and cultural institutions of the United States, truth is viewed as a liability, ignorance becomes a virtue, and informed judgments and critical thinking demeaned and turned into rubble and ashes. Under the reign of this normalized architecture of alleged common sense, literacy is regarded with disdain, words are reduced to data and science is confused with pseudo-science. Traces of critical thought appear more and more at the margins of the culture as ignorance becomes the primary organizing principle of American society.

Under the forty-year reign of neoliberalism, language has been militarized, handed over to advertisers, game show idiocy, and a political and culturally embarrassing anti-intellectualism sanctioned by the White House. Couple this with a celebrity culture that produces an ecosystem of babble, shock, and tawdry entertainment. Add on the cruel and clownish anti-public intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson who defend inequality, infantile forms of masculinity, and define ignorance and a warrior mentality as part of the natural order, all the while dethroning any viable sense of agency and the political.

The culture of manufactured illiteracy is also reproduced through a media apparatus that trades in illusions and the spectacle of violence. Under these circumstances, illiteracy becomes the norm and education becomes central to a version of neoliberal zombie politics that functions largely to remove democratic values, social relations, and compassion from the ideology, policies and commanding institutions that now control American society. In the age of manufactured illiteracy, there is more at work than simply an absence of learning, ideas or knowledge. Nor can the reign of manufactured illiteracy be solely attributed to the rise of the new social media, a culture of immediacy, and a society that thrives on instant gratification. On the contrary, manufactured illiteracy is political and educational project central to a right-wing corporatist ideology and set of policies that work aggressively to depoliticize people and make them complicitous with the neoliberal and racist political and economic forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives. There is more at work here than what Ariel Dorfman calls a “felonious stupidity,” there is also the workings of a deeply malicious form of 21st century neoliberal fascism and a culture of cruelty in which language is forced into the service of violence while waging a relentless attack on the ethical imagination and the notion of the common good. In the current historical moment illiteracy and ignorance offer the pretense of a community in doing so has undermined the importance of civic literacy both in higher education and the larger society.

Is there any shortcoming in the analysis of such a complex (and controversial) social phenomenon as neoliberalism and its educational agenda? Put differently: is there any aspect of the neoliberal educational agenda that its critics have failed to address?

Any analysis of an ideology such as neoliberalism will always be incomplete. And the literature on neoliberalism in its different forms and diverse contexts is quite abundant. What is often underplayed in my mind are three things. First, too little is said about how neoliberalism functions not simply as an economic model for finance capital but as a public pedagogy that operates through a diverse number of sites and platforms. Second, not enough has been written about its war on a democratic notion of sociality and the concept of the social. Third, at a time in which echoes of a past fascism are on the rise not enough is being said about the relationship between neoliberalism and fascism, or what I call neoliberal fascism, especially the relationship between the widespread suffering and misery caused by neoliberalism and the rise of white supremacy. I

define neoliberal fascism as both a project and a movement, which functions as an enabling force that weakens, if not destroys, the commanding institutions of a democracy while undermining its most valuable principles. Consequently, it provides a fertile ground for the unleashing of the ideological architecture, poisonous values, and racist social relations sanctioned and produced under fascism. Neoliberalism and fascism conjoin and advance in a comfortable and mutually compatible project and movement that connects the worse excesses of capitalism with fascist ideals – the veneration of war, a hatred of reason and truth; a populist celebration of ultra-nationalism and racial purity; the suppression of freedom and dissent; a culture which promotes lies, spectacles, a demonization of the other, a discourse of decline, brutal violence, and ultimately state violence in heterogeneous forms. As a project, it destroys all the commanding institutions of democracy and consolidates power in the hands of a financial elite. As a movement, it produces and legitimates massive economic inequality and suffering, privatizes public goods, dismantles essential government agencies, and individualizes all social problems. In addition, it transforms the political state into the corporate state, and uses the tools of surveillance, militarization, and law and order to discredit the critical press and media, undermine civil liberties while ridiculing and censoring critics. What critics need to address is that neoliberalism is the face of a new fascism and as such it speaks to the need to repudiate the notion that capitalism and democracy are the same thing, renew faith in the promises of a democratic socialism, create new political formations around an alliance of diverse social movements, and take seriously the need to make education central to politics itself.