

# RACE, POLITICS AND PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY: EDUCATION IN A TIME OF CRISIS

**Stephen McCloskey**

Giroux, Henry A. (2021) *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Henry Giroux is the Paulo Freire distinguished scholar in critical pedagogy at McMaster University, Canada. He has developed a critical theory of education that emphasises ‘crucial intersections between the role of education in schools and universities with that of culture and public life’ (Giroux, 2021). He is a prolific author of books and articles, a public intellectual and regular media contributor. His latest book, *Race, Politics and Pedagogy*, is a reflection on the intersecting plagues of COVID-19 and neo-fascism framed in the final year of the Trump presidency in the United States (US). This is a book firmly situated in the US with only fleeting references to the impact of the pandemic in other parts of the world. The timeframe of the book begins with the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organisation in January 2020 and ends with Trump’s electoral defeat in November 2020. However, there is no sense of celebration at Trump’s political demise given the narrow nature of his loss and the persistent and malignant danger of the factors that brought him to power. ‘Trump’s defeat should not erase the notion’, argues Giroux, ‘that the political, economic and cultural forces that created the conditions for his presidency have disappeared’ (xviii). Far from it. ‘We are in a new historical period’, warns Giroux, ‘one that has inherited a neoliberal legacy in which every aspect of society has been transformed and corrupted by the tools of financialization, deregulation and austerity’ (x).

The book has four sections with the first, ‘Pandemic Landscapes’, providing the context to, and impact of, Trump’s disastrous handling of the pandemic which resulted in 4 percent of the world’s population having 25 percent of the world’s infections (49). ‘Pandemic pedagogy’ is the twisted language and anti-intellectualism used by Trump and his acolytes to rationalise the horrific scale of human loss in the US as the virus overwhelmed a public

health sector left unequal to the challenges of the pandemic from decades of neoliberal reform. The COVID-19 pandemic, argues Giroux, ‘has revealed with laser-beam clarity how incapable the irrationality of a profit-driven capitalism, is in dealing with a global public health crisis that has been as catastrophic as it has been deadly’ (x-xi).

Giroux cites Canadian academic, Brian Massumi, who provides a chilling neoliberal rationalisation of the carnage caused by the pandemic, particularly among the most vulnerable, as being necessary to sustain the economy. I’ve re-produced the quotation below:

“The free-market economy must be saved at all costs. We just have to push through. The most vulnerable should be good troopers and prepare to self-sacrifice to save the country from this threat worse than death: a sick economy. The old, the immuno-compromised, the homeless, and all those who tend in the best of times to fall to the bottom of the triage list (the disabled, those with autism, people with Downs, people with dementia, the poor) will be the nation’s unsung heroes. Never mind the resemblance to eugenics ...” (Massumi, 2020).

This false dichotomy that the pandemic meant saving jobs or people’s lives was part of a pandemic pedagogy, which Giroux argues, ‘functions to shape human agency, desire, nodes of identification to the logic of consumerism while privileging a hyper form of masculinity and legitimating a friend / enemy distinction’ (167).

Section two of the book – ‘Populism and the Crisis of Education’ – suggests how the pandemic was used by authoritarian leaders, including Trump, to normalise ‘elements of the fascist state under the guise of addressing the pandemic’ (38). As the pandemic exposed the failings of neoliberalism to tackle the pandemic ‘populist leaders attacked all vestiges of liberal capitalism while refusing to name neoliberal inequities in wealth and power as a basic threat to their societies’ (85). Trump resorted to the othering of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers to distract from the failings of neoliberalism,

using ‘bigotry, nativism, racism and scapegoating foreigners for social problems’ (99). Under Trump, ‘civic illiteracy and charged emotional rhetoric’ became tools for hegemonic control (62) as language became ‘weaponised’ (63) and ‘unmoored from critical reason’ (65). A surge in military expenditure, surveillance capitalism, border closures and the suspension of civil liberties’ (42) saw a spike in deportations and growing intolerance of dissent through protest and mobilisations. This was facilitated by a ‘politics of depoliticisation’ which ‘erodes modes of critical agency, democratic values and civic institutions central to a robust democracy’ (68). Giroux identifies two key enablers for ‘the slide into authoritarianism’ in the US. The first was the ‘absence of a broad-based left movement in the United States’ (81) and the second was a slumbering majority (86) trapped in what Freire described as a ‘culture of silence’ (1993: 12) created by civic illiteracy. Giroux powerfully recalls the cruelty of Trump’s treatment of migrants. When his administration ended a humanitarian programme known as Temporary Protected Status Policy (90), 200,000 Salvadorian migrants were among those deported. Trump also used enhanced police powers to round up migrant children at the border, separate them from their parents and incarcerate them in appalling conditions (66).

Section three titled ‘The Promise of History’ laments the loss of historical consciousness as a means of framing Trump’s authoritarianism in the context of the central elements of totalitarianism captured in Hannah Arendt’s reflections on fascism (133). ‘Education is crucial as an analytical tool’, argues Giroux, ‘in making the elements of a fascist politics visible while situating the latter historically in order to gain some perspective on the real danger in the present’ (142). The absence of memory and historical consciousness in the US demands that ‘the teaching of history’ become a ‘protected space’ to teach students to ‘hold power accountable’ (129). This section argues that ignorance and depoliticisation abetted by a compliant media, a weak political opposition and what Giroux calls a ‘Vichy Republicanism’ (158) sustained Trump’s ‘culture of cruelty’ (23). Giroux is scathing of the Republican party’s ‘Faustian bargain with incipient authoritarianism’ (159) reserving particular criticism for Trump’s ‘dangerous

lackeys’ (162) Senators Mitch McConnell and Lindsay Graham. Short-term political expediency always appeared to override any political distaste with Trump’s racist dog-whistling to far-right white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys or encouraging police repression of Black Lives Matter activists following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. Racism is the other pandemic captured by the book as Giroux finds that pandemic pedagogy ‘legitimizes the language of hate in everyday exchanges’ and ‘Degrades people of color’ (xiii).

Section four of the book - ‘Thinking Beyond Plagues’ – worryingly suggests that ‘fascism never goes away but is always just beneath the surface of society and can erupt at any time’ (199). The inequities, racism and political inertia of neoliberal capitalism remain very much in place. The book ends before the invasion of the Capitol Building by Trump supporters in January 2021, which served to underline its assessment that ‘we are in the midst of a legitimization crisis and new political formations are trying to be reborn’ (xi). Giroux suggests three key lessons from the pandemic:

“First and foremost, the intersecting inequalities that propagate capitalism as an economic and ideological system must be made visible and challenged. Second, we must learn from the history that created the conditions that made the pandemic and Trump’s presidency even imaginable. Thirdly, we must re-think both the politics and the future we want” (193).

From an educational perspective, this demands a critical awakening and consciousness to support collective action in the social sphere. As Freire suggested: ‘To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first recognise its causes so that through transforming action they can create a new situation’ (1993: 29). Giroux argues that ‘Agency is an educational and political issue and has to be developed through the hard work of the merging of consciousness raising and meaningful activism’ (203). In the age of fake news, media manipulation and anti-intellectualism, public education and activism remains a significant challenge amid a ‘fog of ignorance’ (174).

‘What is needed’, suggests Giroux, ‘is an anticapitalist movement that can re-direct the pain, anger and rage of the dispossessed’ (115).

There is a temptation, following the election of President Biden in November 2020, to regard the threat posed by Trump’s naked racism, authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism as having abated. The publication of *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy* is, therefore, an important warning of the fragility of democracy and how the inequities created by neoliberalism can quickly slide into fascism and the erosion of civil liberties. Using the framing of Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), the pandemic became the ultimate cover for disaster capitalism with Trump trampling on civil liberties and using emergency COVID-19 stimulus payments as cover for ‘corporate welfare’. So, while its tempting to put Trump’s administration into the rear view mirror and carry on, we should remember that the neoliberal economic system that created the inequalities and democratic drift crucial to his assuming power, remains very much in place. *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy* is essential to us understanding how this happened and how critical education and historical consciousness are urgently needed to support transformative learning and human agency.

Given the global spread of the virus and pandemic pedagogy, I thought the book could have said more about global trends linking authoritarianism with a botched handling of the pandemic. Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Modi’s India and Johnson’s Britain all fell into COVID-induced crises accelerated by appalling leadership. These connections are only superficially drawn. I thought, too, that the book was stronger on diagnosis than prognosis, particularly in regard to how educators penetrate the ‘fog of ignorance’ created by social media, political deceit and Trump echo chambers like *Fox News*. Part of the answer appears to lie in the civil society activism of Black Lives Matter and other civil society movements that have supported community education and activism. This activism appears to be influencing a more radical active left among Congressional Democrats which, for example, criticised President Biden’s support of Israel’s attack on the Gaza Strip in May 2021 (Khalid, 2021). It will be interesting to see how far this more progressive voice in Congress can influence Biden’s administration going forward.

For some years now, I've been suggesting in this journal, that development educators and international non-governmental organisations have been asleep at the wheel in regards to the question of neoliberalism in Britain and Ireland (McCloskey, 2019). They have mostly ignored the correlation between neoliberalism and poverty and inequality. *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy* reveals the dangers and horrors of what awaits when we ignore this question and allow inequality to slide into authoritarianism. Development personnel of all stripes should read this book and start mobilising against the forces of neoliberalism. As Giroux suggests on the very last line of his book: 'The ghosts of fascism may have been pushed back in the shadows but they have not disappeared (2021: 209).

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