

Book review.**Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?**

Henry A. Giroux, 2009 Palgrave Macmillan ISBN 978-0-23061329-4.

Reviewed by Doug Nicholls,

Young people are locked up in great number for ‘crimes’ committed as a result of being locked out of meaningful social engagement and the wealth of society. This powerful book argues that society and educationalists should lock progressive policies for young people securely into the heart of social and economic policy. It argues, from a North American experience, for significant social investment in informal radical education, known in Britain as youth work and an end to the politics and economics of the mad market place.

If you think our problems are bad, consider the problems in the United States of America where youth work has less of a tradition, where inequality is more extreme, where public services have never been as developed, where there has never been a youth or health service, where there are 28 million people on food stamps, where 45 million have no health insurance and 4 million people, including many black young people are in jails and many thousands are waiting the death penalty. Social breakdown of the kind we are seeing in the neoliberal economies, is generating a frightening *Blade Runner* reality. The brutality of the States is the future of Britain if current trends continue.

By studying extreme circumstances you often get a good idea of what is in store for you if these trends are allowed to develop here. The trends in US society are without question the trends that are dominant here though we do not experience them so acutely. In recent discussion these have been called the neoliberal agenda. Spotting trends should make us more able to defend our practice and the position of young people in society. This book helps youth workers to get out of the sleep walk they have been in for a very long time and to wake up to a few realities we can do something about. Many do not realise they have been sleepwalking because the neoliberal economy we are part of has been the only thing that many have known themselves since childhood. However, it is a weird, callous new thing, and Giroux demonstrates this.

Giroux charts the criminality of the main features of neoliberalism in relation to young people in the United States; he gives the facts, but it is the way of seeing and the analysis which is significant. Many of the anecdotes are as unbelievable as they are heart rending. He allows young people to tell their sad stories of neglect and alienation. He believes “young people have become a generation of suspects in a society destroyed by the merging of market fundamentalism, consumerism, and militarism.” He puts the position of young people in a wide cultural and economic context and in doing so gives youth workers in Britain conceptual tools to understand and challenge their own predicament.

Democracy, even in the confines of the post war capitalism, gave minimum guarantees of security, there was a kind of social contract that even the most disadvantaged would not be destitute and mechanisms for re engagement would be

found. This contract has been broken. At the same time the market as an alternative to the democratic state blends with a new authoritarianism which punishes the most marginalised. Young people are either seen as consumers or dangerous demons. In a previous review I highlighted the importance of the work by Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, in their work *Consumer Kids*. They demonstrate how lifestyles and health have been worsened by the corporations. Giroux takes this further and shows the devastating impact of the capitalist children and young people related market in the States and how young people have been targeted as commodities by big business.

Giroux describes the neoliberal society as a theatre of cruelty. It is built on the biggest concentrations of wealth in the fewest hands in recent history. Fewer own more, and more do more work for less, while even more are marginalised and outcast from sources of solidarity and social cohesion. This especially applies to children and young people who of course do not work and have considerable, but ultimately limited, spending power. Young people are the main collateral damage caused by this new aggressive neoliberalism.

The popular demonisation of the young now justifies responses to youth that were unthinkable in the States (and here?) twenty years ago including criminalisation, and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, zero tolerance policies and the profit laden expansion of both the binge drinking markets and the sexualisation of fashion and youth culture. CCTV cameras reign down on young people's spaces in case they rebel or act as badly as the market wants them to.

If the market is to penetrate everything there can be no tolerance of forces which put the brakes on it. These can be political, organisational and cultural. In summary such forces go under the name of democracy. People collectivise to assert common interests. To do this they must debate, decide and act. This is all too cumbersome for the market which must move swiftly constantly revolutionising technique and consumer gadgets to make its buck. The market can't have anything stand in its way so wants to atomise people as individual consumers. Hence the erosion of civil liberties, the rise of authoritarianism and the necessary development of a predatory culture of fear of anything which may challenge the existing market based philosophy, economy or property rights. Critical pedagogy is such a threat.

Part of the importance of Giroux's work is in his cross disciplinary thinking. He makes connections and links between social currents. Too much thinking about the condition of young people is in separate boxes, the sociology of youth, the impact of youth work, youth crime, youth culture, social policy etc. Giroux interrelates these areas and stimulates a way of thinking that more youth workers should get used to.

He sees the theatre of cruelty as a wide stage reproduced daily through the regime of common sense and a narrow notion of political rationality that neoliberalism "reaches from the soul of the subject citizen to educational policy to practices of empire." Using other words you could say there is a 'biopolitics' that is a personal politics of inter personal relationships and self identity which neoliberalism exploits through its penetration of media and games markets and everyday, alienated experience. People are no longer just controlled by coercive state forces but by technologies of consent

produced largely by the gaming and media industries. Of course the young are a particular target in this regard. Most computer games are military and aggressive.

We have to raise big questions of power and responsibility again if we are to engage meaningfully with young people and empower them. Giroux urges the trainers in higher education of future generations of progressive educationalists to reassert their commitments to challenging the current trends.

Serious investment in young people as creators and not consumers is being abandoned, this is the biggest indication of disinvestment in society's future. A symbol of this turning away is the demise of the youth service. We never had statutory funding, we had an indicative figure, now even that has gone. Youth services are funded by a nineteenth century array of philanthropic organisations and the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Short term funding builds welcome and new multi purpose buildings with no on costs and a distracting leisure agenda. The lure of the off license is countered by apparently harmless positive activities. These are intoxicating in their own way as they can lack depth and avoid the engagement of young people in feeling empowered. They numb the mind. Positive activities in the youth work sense include moral and political dialogue and debate, collective organisation in groups. Youth work inspires and illuminates the mind.

The legislation underpinning positive activities does not want youth work. It also doesn't want publicly provided services and the key aspect of the Education and Inspections Act was that it put all services for children and young people out to tender. The accountants Price Coopers Waterhouse said in a report to government that the market of services to children and young people was worth £6 billion a year and they wanted a slice of the action, so legislation came in to help them.

Historically education is the battleground for the development of critical ideas and challenges to mindless unquestioned orthodoxy. Historically also in Britain in particular, youth and community work practice is very much an additional opportunity within the spectrum of education provision to develop a radical, critical, emancipatory, questioning practice, a form of pedagogy linked to collective aspirations for social justice and equality. We seek to educate to turn an upside down world the right way up through communal effort and mutual assistance. It has always been absolutely fundamental to the best youth work practice that education is evolved in dialogue with young people on the basis of an understanding of the context of their lives and freely chosen engagement. That context is a social construct and we should understand it more.

So we find ourselves with young people at the centre of the neoliberal target and the critical pedagogy that we represent not far away from it. Young people will suffer more unless youth workers restore their conviction and practice in a socialist inspired, radical critique of society and an engagement of young people and communities in collective action for change.

We have always understood culture as Giroux does "as an activity in which young people actually produce the conditions of their own agency through dialogue,

community participation, public stories, and political struggle.” It is the defence and reassertion of this culture that is now at stake.

The preciousness of the lives of the young is matched now only by the preciousness of defending progressive youth work practice. The two are intertwined within the British context. Giroux’s book clearly shows what is in store if we don’t assert our defence of youth work and young people.