

Book Review

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***Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis*, Henry Giroux, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, USA.**

In January 2020, few anticipated that the declaration of an international health emergency by the World Health Organization would become a turning point in contemporary world history. In the months that followed, journalists, academics, and public intellectuals began to observe the alarmingly deep imprint that the COVID-19 pandemic was leaving on politics, economy, society, and education. A medical crisis was obvious, but a social crisis was riding atop a mutating virus—social isolation, highhanded governance, the increasing intervention of technology giants in daily life, livelihoods being wiped off, and untimely deaths were becoming the new normal. Henry Giroux was one of the prominent voices speaking on the phenomenon, calling out the economic and political manufacturing of an avoidable crisis. In his book, *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy*, he elaborates upon the pandemic’s educational cultural project in the context of the American state, polity, and society.

The book examines the theatre of cruelty during a health crisis and elaborates what Giroux terms as “pandemic pedagogy”. In keeping with the tradition of critical education, the critique is underlined by emancipatory concerns.

**Critique and Hope**

Giroux’s earlier writings have extensively elaborated on the tenets of critical pedagogy. The current book extends the method of critical analysis to examine the activities of Donald Trump in his first term in office, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the militarisation of human life, culture and language in the US. He strongly articulates that Trump’s first term was a manifestation of the political-cultural-economic crisis brought on by neoliberalism, which

lived on after his exit from office. The re-election of Trump urges a reading of the book for an understanding of what is likely to continue.

Giroux's arguments are built on an examination of power, domination, socio-economic inequality, and injustices. He takes up issues of ultra-nationalism, neoliberal capitalism, aggressive political language, and pedagogies in the course of examining systemic racism, media propaganda, an ailing welfare state, and public health.

Racism in politics is unpacked by Giroux, in the racialised language of Trump. Trump attributed the corona virus to a race and nationality, leading to prejudice against Asian Americans and abetting attacks on them. The regime's hatred towards immigrants is also couched in the pandemic's language of disease, vermin, and infestation, thus endangering their lives. Giroux traces this racial hatred to the politics of disposability and the failures of American capitalism in providing necessary medical care to those in need, while expanding the privatisation and competitive bids for essential medical care. The state's systemic racial injustices towards Black lives are discussed in the murders of Black people, including that of George Floyd. Giroux argues that fighting only for human rights is inadequate without democratic socialism. The rise of online racial vigilantism during lockdowns and the accommodation of white supremacists as policy advisors to Trump draws attention to the rise of fascist politics. Giroux thus sees worldwide support for Floyd as acts of solidarity for collective resistance against racial and economic injustice and for the struggle for a socialist democracy.

Giroux remains committed to Freire's pedagogy of hope, even when recounting the dark details of the pandemic. He reiterates that educators must not submit to despair:

The pandemic has been a crisis that cannot be allowed to turn into a catastrophe in which all hope is lost. On the contrary, the pandemic that threatens democracy should also offer up the possibility to rethink politics and the habits of critical education, human agency, values, and what life would be like in a democratic socialist society. (p xi)

In this book, as in Giroux's earlier essays on critical pedagogy, nurturing human agency is posited as crucial to counter despair. He builds on the ideas of inseparability of hope and critique. If critique is in unravelling the structures of power, silencing, and domination, then hope is to be sought in the collective act of challenging it. Critique makes power visible and

militant hope creates the individual and collective energy needed to address the real problems that people are encountering in their daily lives.

It is worth noting here that in recent times, critique has been dismissed as negativity, while “feel-good” acts that refrain from an analysis of power get spotlighted. In this exercise, truth is a casualty, and pseudoscience dominates the social sphere, harming human agency. Giroux’s analysis of pseudoscience and feel-good positivity that overlooks power relations also enables us to think about the events in India in April 2020. As news began to stream in about an unknown virus and people were faced with fears of loss of life and livelihood, the Indian state encouraged a cheerful clanging of vessels, adding to the confusion and mystery about the virus. As in the US, promoting such a positive outlook did not spare people from medical shortages, death, and loss of livelihoods as the pandemic raged on. Giroux’s ideas of critical hope are in sharp contrast to such fatalism and positivity. It is not an empty promise but a highly political act. He observes that hope that is depoliticised is:

...the enemy of agency, and agency is reduced to learning how to survive rather than working to improve the conditions that bear down on one’s life and society in general. Dealing with life’s problems becomes a solitary affair, reducing matters of social responsibility to a regressive and depoliticized notion of individual choice. (p. 93)

Instead, he argues for a hope that thrives in the margins, in the agency that leads to struggle and that pushes for active citizenry and solidarities.

Giroux emphasises that critical pedagogy must survive for the health of a democracy. However, his concern in the current book is to elaborate upon the methods of pandemic pedagogy, which he identifies as the pedagogy of neoliberal fascism.

### **Pandemic Pedagogy and Populism vs. Critical Pedagogy**

Giroux spells out the opposing aims of critical pedagogy and pandemic pedagogy in the course of the book which has four sections, with two chapters in each section. The four sections discuss the pandemic landscape of militarisation and the language of war, populism, and the crisis of education, the promise of history, and of thinking beyond plagues. The two pedagogies are contrasted in the struggle over agency, knowledge, desire, and values. This is:

...crucial to understanding both the nature of the global crisis and what it means to rethink politics in the interest of developing mass movements of resistance, especially in the face of the rise of a fascist politics. (p. x)

He asserts that pandemic pedagogy operates from the space of “social media platforms and mainstream and right-wing cultural apparatuses” (p. xii), celebrating ignorance, fuelling dominations, and undermining the agency of critically engaged actors.

The first section of the book focuses on Trump’s politics and the proponents of the pandemic pedagogy. American media such as Fox News is presented as one of the examples, engaged in defaming experts, spreading falsehoods, and actively misrepresenting and eroding the truth (pp. 30–31). It emerges that Trump’s fatal suggestion to inject disinfectants to overcome the virus was not an aberration. Several instances are cited where medical knowledge was disregarded, pseudoscience promoted, and governance weaponised. Giroux argues that all this had a dangerous outcome for dissenting states, Black Americans, and the vulnerable, elderly, and youth.

Giroux spends considerable effort in explaining the spectacle, pageantry, and political theatre that is part of fascist politics. The cultural role of the media is also examined. These discussions would interest students of culture, media, the state, and politics, even as they examine the trends in their own countries.

The second section of the book develops pandemic pedagogy within the backdrop of populist politics, threats to democracy, and racial cleansing. At length, Giroux examines the rise of right-wing populism, its political forces, media control, authoritarian actions and crackdown on dissenters, and its relationship with neoliberal economics. He, however, does not reserve his critique for the right wing—he also problematises populism that may be progressive in its intent. Accordingly, critical education is necessitated by the limits of populism, as the former focuses on building collective consciousness for resistance that will take on new capitalist formations.

The concept and nature of critical education is further developed in the third and fourth section. Giroux underlines the emancipatory nature of critical pedagogy and the need to rewrite the

politics of ignorance. This includes developing perspectives on history, memory, and everyday actions towards a future that does not mimic the authoritarian present. The democratic definitions of words such as freedom, inclusion, and democracy are reiterated to clear the confusions over their meanings in the post-pandemic world.

## Conclusion

In *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy*, Giroux draws upon a large number of texts, commentaries, media reports, and political speeches. He critically analyses the interrelatedness of neoliberalism with authoritarian regimes and the politics of disposability with race and inequality. The critical lens on language and political culture illuminates the roots of a health crisis and the widespread deaths that followed. The pandemic is hence located within the larger history of racial violence, neoliberal capitalism, and the failing welfare state, to explain why the suffering was borne most by the racially marginalised. Giroux historicises the fascist turn in American politics and emphasises the importance of history teaching for its liberating potential against “organised forgetting” and social isolation. These methods of Giroux thus draw attention to the role and content of critical education, which are also tasked with exposing pandemic pedagogy in classrooms and outside.

The discussion on race is mainly seen within the economic and political structures of injustice, where state violence mirrors the long legacy of racial violence. The margin is thus a space for understanding power and domination and for building solidarities and alliances. While Giroux does talk about the critical educator’s task, the question of what would be the pedagogic tools and strategies for building alliances in fraught times does arise. Moreover, how will teachers handle the dual challenge of expanding critical discourse alongside countering neoliberal attacks on educational spaces?

Critical education builds on the idea of resistance, but I found pandemic pedagogy a useful concept to think on educational reproduction in contemporary times. Similarly, concepts such as “cultures of cruelty” and neoliberal “disimagination machines” elaborated in the book aid in understanding the attack on “reason” and the amplification of hate in society. Giroux writes with an activist’s urgency. He challenges the neutrality of education and makes a case for the centrality of politics in education.

## References

Giroux, H. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. Continuum.

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