

Giroux, Henry. Border Crossings: Cultural Workers  
And the Politics of Education. New York: Routledge,  
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## **The Hope of Radical Education: A Conversation with Henry Giroux**

The School of Education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, is housed in McGuffey Hall, named after the author of the famous nineteenth century readers and a long-time professor at Miami University. As one approaches the building from the west, a large statue of McGuffey rears from the shrubbery. The inscription reads:

Wm. Holmes McGuffey  
1800-1878

Who while professor in Miami University  
compiled the famous McGuffey readers  
Which established the social standards  
of the great Middle West of the United States.

Eminent Divine and Philosopher  
Peer of College Teachers  
Inspirer of young men.

On another panel are chiseled the first words from the first lesson of the first McGuffey reader:

Here is John  
And there are Ann and John.  
Ann has got a new Book.  
Ann must keep it nice and clean.  
John must not tear the book.  
But he may see how fast he can learn.

It was both appropriate and ironic that Henry Giroux, a leading spokesperson for radical education in America today, should have his offices in a building named after McGuffey—appropriate because both attained a measure of recognition in the educational world and ironic because one could scarcely imagine two more dissimilar philosophies. When we met Giroux in his third floor offices he commented on the irony. “McGuffey was pretty conservative in his thinking but he was a committed educator. We share that in common.” We had not come to talk about McGuffey but to get some perspective on a movement in education that is gaining considerable prominence. So we began our business with a leading question.

*Q—What is a radical education?*

Giroux—Radical education doesn’t refer to a discipline or a body of knowledge. It suggests a particular kind of practice and a particular posture of questioning received institutions and received assumptions. I would say in a general way that the basic premises of radical education grew out of the crisis in social theory. More specifically, we can distinguish three traits: radical education is interdisciplinary in nature, it questions the fundamental categories of all disciplines, and it has a public mission of making society more democratic. This last point is perhaps the principal reason why radical education as a field is so exciting. We can take ideas and apply them.

*Q—Almost like having your own laboratory?*

Giroux—Something like that. I prefer to think of it as a public sphere. Most disciplines don’t have that. As a result their attempts to construct a public discourse become terribly academized and limited. That is why I find radical education so exciting both theoretically and politically.

*Q—How close is the tie between the two?*

Giroux—Very close. We can add that as another distinguishing trait. Radical education joins theory and praxis.

*Q—Is radical synonymous with critical?*

Giroux—Yes, I think they have to be. I can’t conceive of a radical position that is not at the same time, and even in the first instance, critical both in historical terms about the ways schools have evolved in this country and ideologically in terms of the particular kinds of values that operate in our schools and in our practices of education. Critical education operates on two basic assumptions. One, there is a need for a language of critique, a questioning of presuppositions. Radical educators, for example, criticize and indeed reject the notion that the primary purpose of public education is economic efficiency. Schools are more than company stores. They have the much more radical purpose of educating citizens. Which is why the second base assumption of radical education is a language of possibility. It goes beyond critique to elaborate a positive language of human empowerment.

*Q—We hear a lot about empowerment these days. How do you understand that term?*

Giroux—It is the ability to think and act critically. This notion has a double reference: to the individual and to society. The freedom and human capacities of individuals must be developed to their maximum but individual powers must be linked to democracy in the sense that social betterment must be the necessary consequence of individual flourishing. Radical educators look upon schools as social forms. Those forms should educate the capacities people have to think, to act, to be subjects, and to be able to understand the limits of their ideological commitments. That’s a radical paradigm. Radical educators believe that the relationship between social forms and social capacities is such that human capacities get educated to the point of calling into question the forms themselves. What the dominant educational philosophies want is to educate people to adapt to those social forms rather than critically interrogate them. Democracy is a celebration of difference, the politics of difference, I call it, and the dominant philosophies fear this.

*Q—Is your position that our assumptions were at one time sound and became outmoded or were they faulty to begin with?*

Giroux—If we are talking about traditional perspectives, I think the traditionalists have always been wrong about the nature of education.

*Q—How can you say such a thing?*

Giroux—Let me put it differently and say that within the field of education the languages that have dominated have generally been languages that have highly instrumentalized the purposes of schooling by either privileging certain groups of elites who become the managers of society or narrowing the scope of education so severely that schools become mere factories to train the work force. The traditionalists lack a language of possibility about how schools can play a major role in shaping public life.

*Q—But surely the liberal arts tradition has not been instrumentalist in that way?*

Giroux—I say that liberal education in any ideal sense of that term has always occupied a subordinate position vis-à-vis the dominant languages. And that is unquestionably true in this country since the 1950s. If we are talking about the public schools then the instrumentalist argument is very, very powerful. And this has been true from the beginning. If we are talking about higher education then it depends on what kinds of schools we have in mind. We all know our educational system is tiered. Some institutions are vocational. Others are places of real learning, although primarily for the elite. Harvard will never define itself as an institution whose primary mission is the promotion of industrial growth! It appeals to the life of the mind, the good life, and so forth. The higher rhetoric! We can distinguish different missions. But if we look at higher education in general I argue that the instrumentalist ideology prevails.

*Q—Hasn’t the wave of reforms we have had lessened the dominance of that ideology?*

Giroux—I don't think so. Most of them have to my way of thinking been misguided. What has been the thrust of these reforms? Back to basics, merit pay, a standardized curriculum, raising test scores, evaluation criteria, and the like. This is just another version of the technological fix that ignores the philosophical questions. It is quantifying the educational process in a belief that the outcome will be some kind of excellence or economic competence. All of this suggests to me that those who are pushing these reforms have no educational philosophy at all. We have to ask what the purposes of education are, what kind of citizens we hope to produce. To say that test scores are the answer is to beg the question of "What do test scores measure anyway?"

Here is a story that perfectly illustrates the point. Joe Clark, a school principal in Newark, has been touted by many reformers as the paragon of what an inner school educator should be. How does Clark operate? He marches through the halls of his school with a bullhorn and a baseball bat, publicly berating anybody who flouts his authority. When students misbehave they must learn the school anthem and sing it over the P.A. system. Clark is given credit for restoring authority to the school and for raising the test scores of his students. What that report omits is that some nine hundred students, most of them minorities, have been expelled to roam the streets with bleak prospects. One has to ask: What educational philosophy motivates this kind of action? What sense of learning do students get? How do teachers teach in such a context?

*Q—Has there ever been a time when schools met your criteria?*

Giroux—No, although there is a discernible tradition of dissent and vision that argues for a connection and the imperatives of a critical democracy. It is an important and powerful tradition, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s in this country. But we are not talking about much history here. Prior to the twentieth century there wasn't much education of the sort we think appropriate for a democracy for the simple reason there wasn't much democracy.

*Q—Does democracy have to be critical democracy to be genuine?*

Giroux—That's what I mean. Dewey talked about democracy as a way of life that has to be made and remade by each generation.

*Q—The existentialists use the word appropriation to cover all questions of making our ideals meaningful in a lived context.*

Giroux—I like that word. It brings to the fore for me the crucial role of pedagogy and the question of how we learn to become subjects who engage not only our own self formation but the possibilities for society at any given time. How does one come to self-understanding? How does one situate oneself in history? How do we relate questions of knowledge to power? How do we understand the limitations of our institutions, or even of our age? Those are pedagogical questions. Radical educators understand them to be political questions as well. But let's face it, this is a lost discourse. None of the many recent reports about educational reform even scratches the surface of this problem.

*Q—What problem is that again?*

Giroux—The relationship between pedagogy and power.

*Q—Are radical educators a heard voice in the land?*

Giroux—They are an argument on the block, especially since 1976 when Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis published their path-breaking *Schooling in Capitalist Society*. I would argue that that book, along with some seminal works in the sociology of education, provided the foundation for a new language that went beyond the earlier critical tradition of Dewey and his colleagues. In the last ten years this influence has become quite evident in what is published, what is taught, and what is talked about at professional meetings.

*Q—Does radical education draw its inspiration primarily from Marxism?*

Giroux—It did. Bowles and Gintis did. But as I look at the work of radical educators today I would find it difficult to say that Marxism is the primary influence on it. And where the Marxist influence exists in education it can sometimes be overly reductionistic and one-dimensional.

*Q—You mean not good Marxism?*

Giroux—It is more a question of how good Marxism is to begin with. We can appropriate a number of good things from Marxism but do we want to appropriate the paradigm itself?

*Q—It seems the radical educator has to do just that in some sense because Marxism has supplied the principal language of critique in the 20th century. Where else would you look?*

Giroux—I would say that to be a radical educator today you have to engage the Marxist tradition. And there is no question that Marxist discourse dominated in the beginning because in the beginning most work in radical education was about reproduction theory.

*Q—What is that?*

Giroux—It is a Marxist category which says that the basic function of the schools is to reproduce the dictates of the state in the economic order. It was a rather simple and mechanistic view but not entirely false and it had important consequences for politicizing the debate about the purpose of schools, which is something that the paradigm itself completely ignored.

*Q—But are there other traditions?*

Giroux—I myself draw from a number of positions. There are critical traditions in feminist literature, in literary theory, and in liberation theology that I find useful. But it is hard to put a label on all of this. I would like to call myself a good working-class, radical American.

*Q—As in populist?*

Giroux—Sure. A critical populist who includes some elements of the IWW, Bill Haywood, C. Wright Mills, Martin Luther King, and Michael Harrington. In other words, people who speak to people in a language that dignifies their history and their experience. I don't understand how you can speak to people if you don't celebrate their voices.

*Q—How did you become interested in this field?*

Giroux—I went to college on a basketball scholarship. I started off in the sciences but then the Vietnam War came along and all of a sudden social theory became very important. The more I read the more I became interested in teaching. Not only did I see that as a way to make an impact but I saw teaching as a wonderfully noble profession. And I still feel that way. One of the things I try to impress upon my students is how important this field is.

*Q—What did you do your PhD dissertation on?*

Giroux—It was a study of curriculums. I was interested in the different ways kids learn in schools and the ways in which subject matters get selected for the curriculum. Where I grew up learning was a collective activity. But when I got to school and tried to share learning with other students that was called cheating. The curriculum sent the clear message to me that learning was a highly individualistic, almost secretive, endeavor. My working-class experience didn't count. Not only did it not count, it was disparaged. I was being reproduced according to a different logic. I think schools should be about ways of life. They are not simply instruction sites. They are cultures which legitimize certain forms of knowledge and disclaim others. The language for understanding this phenomenon in some pretty sophisticated ways is now starting to emerge.

*Q—For example?*

Giroux—Take the work being done on ideology and language in schools. It's very rich. If you believe that language actively constructs as well as reflects social reality, that language always develops out of a sense of difference—if something is this it is not that—and that language always embodies particular kinds of values then you can raise questions. You can ask: What is the relationship between what is learned and the pedagogies in place? Where does the language they use come from? Whose interests does it promote? What are its value assumptions? And the like.

*Q—One thinks of inner city schools. It seems to be the case there that the kind of education offered mismatches the experience of those to whom it is offered.*

Giroux—In my mind we have instrumentalized the process of education so much that we have forgotten that the referent out of which we operate is a white, upper-middle-class logic that not only modularizes but actually silences subordinate voices. If you believe that schooling is about somebody's story, somebody's history, somebody's set of memories, a particular set of experiences, then it is clear that just one logic will not suffice.

*Q—Not many people believe that.*

Giroux—Well, I'm surprised how many do. Even people of a very conservative cast are much more open to the kind of argument I am making. They, too, see schools as cultural institutions, as cultural frontiers if you will, and not merely boot camps for the economy. They see the value dimension. Unfortunately, their understanding is not very democratic. My point is that learning has to be meaningful to students before it can become critical. Our problem is that we have a theory of knowledge but no theory of pedagogy.

*Q—Isn't this all pretty abstract? After all, schools are run bureaucratically on the principles of delegated responsibility and dictated policies. And that seems clearly what the majority of Americans want.*

Giroux—But that's another question altogether, although related to the first question. The first question is: Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of the people it is supposed to teach? And the answer is: Yes. People learn that they don't count. The second question is: What are the necessary conditions to educate teachers to be intellectuals so they can engage critically the relationship between culture and learning and change the conditions under which they work? As I put it in some of my writings, we need to redefine the role of teachers as transformative intellectuals.

*Q—Would you elaborate on that intriguing idea?*

Giroux—Michael Waltzer speaks of intellectuals as engaged critics. They do not operate from an aloof perspective that legitimizes the separation of facts from values. They understand the nature of their own self-formation, have some vision of the future, see the importance of education as a public discourse, and have a sense of mission in providing students what they need to become critical citizens. So to give you a somewhat schematic sense of what I mean by teachers as transformative intellectuals, I would say, first, that teachers are engaged. They are partisans, not doctrinaire. They believe something, say what they believe, and offer their belief to others in a framework that always makes it debatable and open to critical inquiry. Second, to talk about teachers as intellectuals is to say they should have an active role in shaping the curriculum. Think of intelligence as a form of currency that enables teachers to have a role in shaping school policy, defining educational philosophies, and working with their communities in a variety of capacities. Transformative intellectuals are aware of their own theoretical convictions and are skilled in strategies for translating them into practice. Above all, finally, it means being able to exercise power. Pedagogy is always related to power. In fact educational theories, like any philosophy, are ideologies that have an intimate relation to questions of power. So learning must be linked not just to learning in the schools but extended to shaping public life and social relationships. The proletarianization of the teaching profession has made educators too dependent and powerless. Does that give you some idea?

*Q—That's fine. Wouldn't you want, for much the same reasons, all professionals to be transformative intellectuals?*

Giroux—To be sure. But bear in mind that the teaching profession alone has the primary responsibility to educate critical citizens whereas we might argue that the first responsibility of, say the medical profession, is healing. Educators have a public responsibility that by its very nature involves them in the struggle for democracy. This makes the teaching profession a unique and powerful public resource.

*Q—Are schools of education moving toward this thinking?*

Giroux—The short answer is that they are starting to move but very slowly. And I have to say, without naming names, that some of our most progressive

schools of education have become disappointingly reactionary. They tend more and more to hire people in the business manager mode and there are few, very few, critical voices to be heard.

*Q—Talk a little about your teaching experience.*

Giroux—It's both very gratifying and very challenging.

*Q—Tell us about the challenging part.*

Giroux—Most of our students are very comfortable with defining themselves as technicians and clerks. For them to be all of a sudden exposed to a line of critical thinking that both calls their own experience into question and at the same time raises fundamental questions about what teaching should be and what social purposes it might serve is very hard for them. They don't have a frame of reference or a vocabulary with which to articulate the centrality of what they do. They are caught up in market logic and bureaucratic jargon. We can't defend what we do that way. We can't make our best case. We always wind up on the defensive and appear to others as second rate and marginal. If, on the other hand, we make the case for critical democracy we can at the same time make the case for the centrality of the teaching profession. Of one thing I am sure, the older paradigm is dying not only in terms of its effectiveness but in terms of its legitimacy as well.

*Q—That's usually referred to as positivism and it has been stated more than once that positivism is dead. Yet it seems to be a very lively corpse.*

Giroux—Oh, it's not dead. I am not saying that at all. What you call positivism I would want to call technocratic rationality or scientism which identifies the idea of progress with an idea of efficiency, which in turn defines itself by abstracting its discourse from questions of power and politics and values. What I am saying is: that paradigm is breaking down, not dead. Look at the urban school systems. They are falling apart all over the country.

*Q—Do you find some teaching techniques more effective than others?*

Giroux—My courses are all seminars. I prescribe the materials I think are important but the students have to write papers and defend their positions. This is the basis of a 15-week working-through process. I don't care what positions the students take. I want them to be able to justify whatever position they do take so they come out with a clearer sense of what they believe in and what effects that might have. I think what I really do is politicize the process of education in the minds of the students. As soon as you say people can be agents in the act of learning you politicize the issue of schooling. It becomes political in the best sense of the word, which is to say that students have to become self-conscious about the kinds of social relationships that undergird the learning process. That's a political issue. Another thing I take very seriously in my teaching is illustrating principles with a sense of voice, with somebody's story. There are experiences out there that illuminate larger questions of educational philosophy. We can, for example, talk about the hidden curriculum of racism, about what black kids have to give up to become academically successful and we can do this through their own voices. Or we can talk about people who have no community of memories. We

can talk about people who are defined by such a nonbelief in the common good that they can't even imagine an alternative vision according to anything other than highly individualistic and egotistical norms. Those stories are important. That is one of the reasons I have a lot of trouble with liberal and procedural morality. It eliminates the stories in favor of abstract rules. Of course, we need to understand that these stories by themselves do not always speak for themselves. But they can become the basis for analyzing a whole range of considerations that are often hidden in the stories. Experience never simply speaks for itself. The language that we bring to it determines its meaning.

*Q—Speak further to the point about student voices. How do you deal with the objection that students are virtual tabula rasas who don't have much to bring to the table?*

Giroux—Let me say what student experience is not. It is not a romantic celebration of adolescence as it sometimes was in the '60s. It is something very different. I am arguing that the notion of experience has to be situated within a theory of learning, within a pedagogy. You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say that these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful, or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it.

*Q—What about the white, middle-class voice?*

Giroux—That's a voice too.

*Q—But isn't it more than a voice? Isn't it the model we set? Doesn't it encapsulate the best experiences we want to emulate? To be blunt, isn't the best voice an urban minority student can adopt that of the white middle class?*

Giroux—In an instrumental sense that is true. But it is a truth that conceals dangers. The problem with that position is that it makes it hard for people to realize how important the question of voice is. We become unquestioning and fail to realize the symbolic violence the dominant voice can exercise. And I will say this: even for the white middle-class majority education often, most often, functions to silence rather than empower them.

*Q—A telling point. You make teaching sound like very hard work.*

Giroux—It is very hard work. That is why teachers need to be intellectuals, to realize that teaching is a form of mediation between different persons and different groups of persons and we can't be good mediators unless we are aware of what the referents of the mediation we engage in are. Teaching is complex, much more complex than mastering a body of knowledge and implementing curriculums. The thing about teaching is that the specificity of the context is always central. We can't get away with invoking rules and procedures that cut across contexts.

*Q—Your view of education seems to make tradition irrelevant.*

Giroux—As I mentioned before, the nature of our educational problems is new and unprecedented. In that sense there is no tradition to appeal to. But there

are elements of a critical pedagogy in all traditions. The radical educator deals with tradition like anything else. It must be engaged and not simply received. Traditions are important. They contain great insights, both for understanding what we want to be and what we don't want to be. The question is: In what context do we want to judge tradition? Around what sense of purpose? We need a referent to do that. If we don't have a referent then we have no context to make sense of tradition. It doesn't supply its own referent.

*Q—Your referent is probably clear by now but could you state it briefly again?*

Giroux—My referent is how do we make this country a real critical democracy.

*Q—Where do you stand on liberal arts education?*

Giroux—A lot of people think everyone should have a liberal arts education. I disagree with that vehemently. Schooling has its own context. Often that context generates methods of inquiry that aren't likely to surface in the liberal arts disciplines.

*Q—Can you, as the clock winds down, summarize your educational philosophy?*

Giroux—Probably not, but I'll try. I find myself frequently falling back on a distinction John Dewey made over forty years ago between "education as a function of society" and "society as a function of education." In other words, are schools to uncritically serve and reproduce the existing society or challenge the social order to develop and advance its democratic imperatives? Obviously, I opt for the latter. I believe schools are the major institutions for educating students for public life. More specifically, I believe that schools should function to provide students with the knowledge, character, and moral vision that build civic courage.

*Q—The expression "civic courage" has a nice ring to it.*

Giroux—We are going to need a lot of it.

*Q—We'll talk again sometime.*

Giroux—I hope we do.