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RETHINKING POLITICS, EDUCATION, AND
HOPE AFTER BUSH

Henry A. Giroux, a leading figure in the fields of critical pedagogy and cultural studies, recently came to McMaster University in Canada from Penn State University, where he taught for more than a decade. He is the author of more than 30 books and 250 journal articles. He was interviewed by Sina Rahmani in his office at McMaster.

Sina Rahmani: Your leaving Penn State was not exactly amicable. You commented that the intellectual atmosphere at Penn State had degraded in recent years. Is that related at all to the current state of affairs of American political culture?

Henry Giroux: I think that many universities in the United States are being undermined by both their increasing alliance with corporate values and interests, on the one hand, and the equally dangerous attack on academic freedom by the political and religious Right, on the other hand. We have witnessed four years in the United States marked by a growing culture of

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fear, insecurity, and repression. This is a culture largely controlled by religious, political, and free-market fundamentalists; this combination, and the power it has exercised on American life, has been profoundly dangerous. The current government is involved in a war at home and a war abroad, both of which are mediated by a messianic view of the world that does not leave much room for dissent, nor for social movements that want to make authority accountable or forms of public and higher education that act as if they are democratic public spheres. And, of course, with Bush's re-election this will all get worse. The Bush administration views higher education as a left-wing bastion that needs to be destroyed, and I am convinced that in his second administration, the universities will continue to come under a harsh political attack. At the same time, the right-wing attack on critical intellectuals offers the Bush administration the kinds of diversions that sidetrack people from thinking about the Iraq war, the resources it is draining, the lives being lost, and the suffering it is producing. We have seen remnants of the attack on higher education already with many academics after the events of September 11th being called "unpatriotic" because they undertook a serious examination of American foreign policy or called "anti-Semitic" because they dared criticize the Israeli government's policies in the Middle East. A senator from Pennsylvania even tried to pass a law withdrawing federal funds from those public universities that harboured professors who criticized Israeli policy in their classes. These are very disturbing trends and do not bode well as to what will happen in higher education in the next four years. So, we are seeing a new war, a war at home, and that war will

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basically be against the universities. We already see the indications of how that war is going to be organized. We see it in the unjust association made between dissent and treason. We see it in legislation in which Republicans, through an appeal to academic freedom, attempt to place more conservatives on faculties. We see it in the increasing corporatization of the university and the marginalization of those disciplines that don't translate immediately into profits. Penn State is one of the largest procurers of military contractors. Susan Searls Giroux and I had written a book called *Take Back Higher Education* on the corporatization of higher education. Essentially, it is an attack on the corporate university, of which Penn State is a poster boy. There was no question in my mind that there would be retribution, though I never anticipated the shape it actually took. What became clear was that Penn State had become inhospitable to any kind of dissent. To be an academic and to constantly find yourself under pressure and isolated, by virtue of an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism and conformity, was completely unacceptable for me. It was a pleasure for me to leave.

SR: Why McMaster? World-class scholar and educator, you could have gone anywhere. Why a small, out-of-the-way school like Mac?

HG: Well, I think McMaster is improving upon its goal of becoming a world-class institution. And I don't just mean that in the traditional sense of attaining the standards of research, teaching, and academic excellence that one associates with Ivy League schools in the United States. Surely, McMaster is capable of attaining the highest quality of excellence in the

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traditional sense, but I think it is also providing a new model of excellence, one that measures a university in terms of how it addresses the needs of civic society on both national and global levels. McMaster takes seriously the relationship between equity and excellence as a political and civic issue. There is a certain worldliness about McMaster, a sense of being in the world, being attentive to the civic quality of a larger, global public sphere. This means, in part, taking seriously what it means to educate students to be critically engaged, civic citizens of the world. Worldliness, as I am using it here, means recognizing the university as a democratic public sphere, a sphere that not only acknowledges the importance of educating students to exercise civic courage and define their lives, in part, through the struggle for social justice and the deepening of democratic imperatives, but also takes seriously the relationship between education and empowerment. This is a university that recruits faculty who combine the contemplative and critical with a broader sense of the importance of public life. It's recruiting faculty who are not afraid to speak out, take risks, cross disciplines, and at the same time create a common symbolic space aimed at fostering more inclusive democratic communities. They really see their role as one of promoting a very viable and crucial public service. Closer to my own location in the university, I see McMaster working very hard to provide a new face for the Humanities. That is, a Humanities that is not just about enlightenment, in the traditional sense of the term—critical yet utterly contemplative—but is also about preparing students to intervene in public life so as to expand and deepen the possibilities of a global democracy. I think this is a Humanities

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that resurrects the best of its critical traditions while at the same time using those traditions, along with the development of new technologies, information systems, and interdisciplinary crossings to define the university as a public sphere, essential to sustaining a vibrant democracy and to help educate students who will be the individual and social agents central to such a challenge. A vibrant university fulfils its public role when it provides the institutional and symbolic resources necessary for young people to develop their capacities to engage in critical thought, participate in power relations and policy decisions that affect their lives, and transform those racial, social, and economic inequities that close down democratic social relations. We have a Dean of the Humanities, Nasrin Rahimieh, who is very smart, brave, and visionary. I really think she needs to be commended for that. In my thirty years, I haven't met very many visionary administrators, and there are more than a handful at McMaster, and I am grateful for her courage and intellectual integrity. We have a growing number of faculty throughout the university who are thinking very thoughtfully about the rapid developments in science, technology, culture, and globalization, as well as the ethical and political implications and the global effects of these changes. We have faculty such as Imre Szeman, David Clark, Liss Platt, Sarah Brophy, Susie O'Brien, and too many others to mention, throughout the university who are doing impressive cross-cutting interdisciplinary work in areas such as critical theory, gender studies, cultural studies, global studies, and communication, and I have no doubt that their insights will broaden and enhance the scholarship that goes on within the traditional

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disciplines. McMaster seems to have taken on the challenge of recruiting faculty who are offering a range of critical literacies, civic competencies, technological skills, and ethical values that serve the noble purpose of improving what some people have called the larger, global public sphere.

SR: The stereotype that seems to pervade public life about academics is that they are detached eggheads with no connection to the world outside. What role do you envisage yourself as playing for students at McMaster?

HG: I think professors and academics in general have a number of obligations to students. On one level, there is the obligation to bring into play a body of knowledge that helps to expand their sense of social and individual agency. It's an obligation, in a sense, to make students more aware of the world in which they find themselves. This suggests educating students to learn how to be able to live in an inclusive and non-repressive democracy. It means nurturing those capacities that enable them to take risks, to make democratic politics and public commitments central to their lives. For me, that obligation does not simply rest on expanding the boundaries of knowledge and skills for students, as important as such a goal is. It also rests on making students more aware of how knowledge can be used as a social, intellectual, and theoretical resource to make them more responsible as agents who can actively shape the larger world. It means using knowledge in more than a narrowly instrumental way—such as preparing for a job—it also means critically embracing knowledge as a means of self-development tied to modes of learning and intellectual work that address matters of

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human freedom, equality, and social justice. Learning in this instance is linked not just to understanding, but also to social change, to those modes of moral witnessing necessary to transform the underlying systemic conditions that produce human suffering. It seems to me that my obligation, in the long run, is to prepare students for a very complex and contradictory world, in which they are going to learn how to govern and not simply be governed. At the same time, they will, I hope, associate their own sense of self-determination and agency with modes of governance that are democratic, cosmopolitan, and deeply concerned with matters of economic and social justice. I may be terribly wrong on this issue, but I think academics have to ask themselves very crucial questions about their vision of the future, their responsibilities as citizens, the role of the state and government, and what the responsibility of the university might be in terms of its liberatory functions.

SR: You bring up the issue of dissent. What do you see as the role of an oppositional academic?

HG: The role of the oppositional academic is essentially to make power accountable, and to do everything one can, both in one's teaching and research, to make clear to students the political and moral stakes about what it might mean to contribute to a culture and social order in which human suffering goes unnoticed and actually becomes normalized. So it seems to me that, as an intellectual, you have a responsibility by virtue of your resources, not to mention the division of labour that academics inhabit, to

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enter into a discourse in which you can make power visible, and employ a language of critique and possibility to enable students to recognize that they can be important political actors in shaping the world they inherit. Central to any viable education is the ability to translate private issues into public concerns, to use theory as a resource and hope as a pedagogical tool to look beyond the horizon of the given, to mediate the memory of loss and the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to open up new locations of struggle and undermine various forms of injustice and domination. We live in a world in which educators have a responsibility to rethink the space of the social and to develop a critical language in which notions of the public good and public life become central to overcoming the privatizing and depoliticizing language of the market. Academics must address the subversive role of the university, its role in preventing institutions from governing without being challenged. Clearly, as public intellectuals, academics can, as Edward Said has suggested, temper any reverence for authority with a sense of critical awareness. Students must engage new modes of literacy in which, to read the world, they must be both critics and cultural producers; they must be able to recognize anti-democratic assaults on public life; and they need a language to defend those vital institutions that are central to every aspect of democratic life. They also need to learn how to read the world from the perspectives of those victims of “democracy” who have their own lessons to teach about what it means to live in a global democracy. I think Jacques Derrida was right in arguing that the university should be a place of unconditional resistance, a place in which nothing is beyond ques-

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tion. At one level, this points to the need for academics to beware of the pitfalls of specialization and professionalism, which often substitute a professional vocation for an intellectual vocation. Professionalism has more to do with reverence than critique, with careerism than an engagement with public life. At the same time, I think that academics must take seriously the presupposition that the task of pedagogy, in the most critical sense, is about critically engaging how knowledge, values, desire, and social relations are implicated in power. Academics must recognize that pedagogy is a moral and political practice, and not merely a methodology, and that it is always an outcome of struggles and cannot be viewed as an a priori discourse that simply needs to be uncovered or revealed. Pedagogy is not just a struggle over particular forms of knowledge or identities; it is also a struggle over how one views the future and what it might mean to prepare students to imagine not only a different future, but one that makes a claim on social justice, solidarity, and the promise of an inclusive democracy.

SR: Where is the best place to do that kind of work? As an American, how do you feel about your role as a critical intellectual being played out in Canada? What responsibilities flow from being a dissenting American?

HG: Being in Canada is a humbling experience for me because I have to learn about the diverse histories, politics, and traditions that inform my current location. At the same time, what I write about is not limited by national boundaries because much of my work on youth, higher education, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, etc., has relevance on a broader, global

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level. But what Canada offers me in the more pragmatic, if not political, sense is a place that is far more hospitable to the kind of political and educational work that has shaped my life. More importantly, it offers me a community of people to work collaboratively with; it provides an environment that encourages critical thought and refuses to indulge the poisonous intolerance that guides policy at the highest level of government in the United States; and it encourages academic work that engages public life. Good intellectual work never takes place in a vacuum; it is always communal, social, vibrant, and draws upon many voices and dialogues. This is a difficult space to create within the university for a variety of reasons ranging from professionalism to sheer petty careerism, but McMaster is a different place for me and provides a space that is more hospitable to community, experimentation, and critical, productive work. Such work always emerges from a community of people who support you and from whom you learn. What I have here, as opposed to what I had at Penn State, is a community that is fabulous. Even my students are wonderful. They are smart, open, involved, and they have a sense of being in the world. I feel renewed in this environment. You can't romanticize critical work in the form of the isolated intellectual performing an endless Sisyphean task. There is nothing romantic about working alone without a sense of community. The romanticization of the isolated intellectual is just that—romanticizing—and I find that McMaster offers a different model for what it means to invent new modes of academic solidarity and active collaborations across disciplines, and to work within new and challenging interdisciplinary contexts.

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SR: What do you foresee in the next four years for your American colleagues?

HG: I think the next four years are going to be a very dangerous time for people who are critical academics. I think we are going to enter into a period of enormous repression in the United States.

SR: Some would argue that we already have.

HG: I am not suggesting it doesn't exist now—I have talked about it earlier—but I think it is going to intensify to a point where it may be difficult to protect those spaces that traditionally were by default, safe, critical, and conducive to the spirit of engaged teaching and academic freedom. New assaults against tenure are in the works, along with increasing attempts to dictate what is being taught, to standardize the undergraduate curriculum, to eliminate those non-instrumental courses that are increasingly viewed as ornamental, and to hire administrators who are managers but not leaders or visionaries. We may also see new attacks on people who express dissident views by attempting to run them out of the university.

SR: That's already happening in Middle Eastern studies.

HG: You're correct, and I think that process will be generalized. We see it happening at Columbia with Joseph Massad, who is under terrific attack because every time he utters a critique of Israel, he's called an anti-Semite. I think these kinds of attacks will increase in the United States in the next few years so that anyone who takes a critical position will be labelled as either un-American or unpatriotic. This attack on dissent is already having

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a terrible chilling effect throughout higher education in the US, and will continue to reinforce a landscape of fear and intimidation that is already a staple of the larger society. People will be very scared about losing their jobs, careers, livelihood, and sense of agency. The current attacks on Ward Churchill, Joseph Massad, and others exemplify the attack by the Right on academic freedom. This trend is very disturbing but not surprising, given the extremists who now control almost all branches of the American government. That's disturbing and frightening.

SR: How do you think students are going to respond to such an atmosphere?

HG: I see enormous movements of opposition developing in the US in the next four years. These movements will build on existing movements and will create new social formations as well. I think you're going to see a substantial amount of collective resistance by students who are not going to tolerate this push to conformity, repression, and the mindless drive of American triumphalism. Many on the Right believe that the universities embody the worst excesses of democracy. Students will not stand for the attack on academic freedom, the increasing corporatization of the university, a national debt that will ruin their future, the assault on public life, the colonial march of empire, the suspension of civil liberties, the rise of a surveillance and control society, and the shrinking of democracy itself. All this spells more dissent and more student protests. The resistance of students is all the more necessary in the face of so much silence by academics, unions,

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and other progressive adults.

SR: You seem to suggest that the US is going back to the Middle Ages.

HG: No, not the Middle Ages. The Gilded Age is more like it. That period in American history when the robber barons and politicians worked together to limit workers' rights, maintain a racialized state, keep women in their place, and reduce every transaction to one of profit and exchange. Power has become arrogant as the new political structures being invented by the Right barely feel the need to legitimate themselves. Hence, people like Samuel Huntington now publish books in which they make overtly racist remarks about Mexicans. Then, there are the public relations, intellectual buffoons such as Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and that crew, who provide an endless discourse of hate, bigotry, and bile.

SR: And why should we worry about these people?

HG: Because they not only drive policy, they play an important role in shaping public culture and individual consciousness. Ideas matter. And these people have access to enormous amounts of power and influence, and use it to drown out dissenting opinions, which are rarely expressed in the dominant media. Academia is considered dangerous by the Right because it is one of the few public spheres left where debate, dialogue, and critical engagement can actually take place.

SR: Is Bush's re-election a failure on the part of progressive academics?

HG: It may testify less to our failure than to the strengths of neo-conser-

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vatives, religious fundamentalists, and free-market extremists. Remember, they control the means of educational production. They control the universities and, for the most part, those dominant spaces where ideas can be produced, legitimated, and circulated. I think it means that progressive academics have to rethink not simply their own role as public intellectuals, but also what it might mean to develop a language and theory relevant for inventing a politics adequate to the challenges of the twenty-first century. Intellectuals across the globe have got to bring their resources together, develop new alliances, and begin to play a powerful role in shaping political culture. We also need to be more concerned about working with groups outside the university. We have to rethink the meaning of politics in the twenty-first century because there is no space outside politics. To assume that somehow politics is absent from what we do may be comforting for some but, in the end, it is one of the worst illusions.

SR: Can your emphasis on politics be dangerous?

HG: Any issue can succumb to forms of dogmatism. Anybody who considers themselves a critical intellectual has to be constantly aware of the dangers that can be produced in the name of politics. Simply to say that we are political is not an excuse for dogmatism. The real question here is, how do we refashion politics in way that resuscitates its democratic possibilities?