

# Who Are You to tell me to Question Authority?

## Radical education in a 'proto-fascist' era

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*Against the New Authoritarianism: Politics after Abu Ghraib*

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Henry Giroux is a highly prolific radical educationalist who has authored over 40 books. Many of his works apply the analytical insights of Critical Theory (a synonym for the Frankfurt School of unorthodox Marxists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse) to highlight the impact of the cultural industries on children's learning. In *Against the New Authoritarianism*, Giroux returns to one of the central concerns of the Frankfurt School: the rise of fascism within liberal democratic societies.

The book has two main hypotheses, which are interrelated. The first is that under the Presidency of George W. Bush, the United States is approaching a proto-fascist state; the second that a critical education is a vital strategy for resisting such developments. The first thesis is by far the most controversial, for the classification of states into particular categories has had far-reaching policy implications. The academic Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a policy advisor to Ronald Reagan, divided non-democracies into two types, those acceptable 'authoritarian' states who the US should support and unacceptable 'evil' / 'totalitarian' states who must be actively undermined.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the rhetoric, the only difference between the two was that 'totalitarian' states had an official policy of 'communism' or 'socialism' and a more redistributive economy, whilst the merely 'authoritarian', whilst having no better human rights records (and in many cases worse), were favourably disposed towards US investment. However, this division between acceptable 'authoritarian' and unacceptable 'totalitarian' regimes not only sought to justify the military and diplomatic manoeuvres of the US in the 1980s, but also helped to shape them. A similar if more simplistic division shapes Bush's foreign policy, with similarly calamitous consequences.

So when Giroux uses the terms 'proto-fascist' and 'fascism', he is not merely employing them in the lazy rhetorical way to stand for something merely 'objectionable'. Giroux is well aware of the political ramifications of these descriptors for the current US regime, and defends their application against likely critics from the right and soft-left. In order to pre-empt these replies, Giroux clarifies that in using the term he is not

suggesting that the United States is literally akin to previous historical examples of fascist regimes. The new authoritarianism is not arriving in swastika emblazoned brown shirts; instead, it uses the discourse of democracy, even when it undermines it. Thus in the acknowledged footsteps of novelist-activist Arundhati Roy, political theorist Sheldon Wolin and American former Middle Eastern journalist Chris Hedges, Giroux sees the new fascism as embodied within democratic institutions, rather than burning them down. So too the new fascist state has a different relationship to the economy: instead of the state incorporating private business (Mussolini), or subordinating industries to the will of the party-state (Hitler), private institutions have taken over the democratic apparatus of government (pp. 17-21).

The economic developments within the United States since the initial rise of fascism in the early twentieth century, and its now unique position

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in late-modernity as an unchallenged military power, means that the old checklist characteristics of fascism, such as that employed by Zbigniew Brzezinski (former policy hawk to the Carter administration) no longer apply. Originally, the characteristics of fascism included an official ideology; a single mass party – typically led by a single person; a system of terror, organised through a political party; monopoly control of communications; sole control of weapons and central control of the economy. These seem absent, or at least underdeveloped, in the US. Giroux acknowledges this, and persuasively argues that instead proto-fascism is formed by a different set of conditions, but shares at least one core element of traditional fascism – a concentration in the hands of the dominant class and away from the broad mass of people (pp. 34-37).

Giroux draws out eight central elements of the new authoritarianism: first, *reactionary modernism*, in which an alliance of free-marketeers, extremist evangelical Christians and neo-conservatives build a sustained social order based upon, and perpetuating, class, gender and ethnic hierarchies (pp. 37-38). The second feature is the *corporatization of civil society*, in which the democratic social spaces where people create their own social relationships are instead placed into service for the business sector and the administrative arm of the state. Without these spaces, "it becomes more difficult for individuals to imagine themselves as political agents or to understand the necessity for developing a discourse capable of defending civic institutions" (p. 39). As a result of this enclosure of communal fora, there are fewer avenues for constructing alternative values and social practices to those laid down by the dominant class (pp. 37-40).

The third feature of proto-fascism is the developing *discourse of patriotism and nationalism* and the culture of fear that supports it. A continual battery of jingoism on the news media, which includes the fluttering flags of the media idents, the label badges of the TV newscasters, and the marginalisation or silencing of governmental critics as 'unpatriotic', are indicative of the strong current of nationalism used to bolster domestic and foreign policy (pp. 40-42). This incessant promotion of a militarised, chauvinistic discourse goes alongside a fourth characteristic: that of *control of mass media* through a combination of oligarchical corporate ownership and significant state regulation. Giroux accuses G. W. Bush's executive of going further than any previous government in intertwining his administration with the mass media and manipulating the *Fourth*

*Estate*.<sup>2</sup> The current leadership have altered legislation to create unchallengeable media conglomerates whose interests and values are inevitably those of economic liberalism, paying journalists to appear objective whilst promoting government policy; hiring actors to pretend to be news reporters to ask prepared questions of officials and creating fake news programs that carry government propaganda and distributing them to unwitting local television channels as video news (pp. 43-46). This deterioration in journalism has an impact on the fifth element – *the rise of an Orwellian version of Newspeak*.

Critical discourse is altered such that policy impacts are disguised, their intentions concealed and rigorous evaluation discouraged. Amongst the examples Giroux identifies are the deliberate misuse of terms such as ‘reform’ and ‘compassionate’, the packaging of policies which allow industries to freely pollute as ‘Clear Skies’ legislation, calling estate tax on multimillionaires ‘death taxes’ and describing supporters of redistributive taxation as akin to the ‘Nazis’. Other Orwellian techniques include the fabrication of the historical record: for example denying that assertions made prior to, and in support of, the Iraq War were ever stated (pp. 47-51). In such circumstances the ability to hold the actions of the powerful to account, or even conceive of a contrary position, becomes restricted.

The sixth element of US proto-fascism is the *collapse of the separation of church and state*. Rather than the tenets of democracy justifying governmental decisions, appeals are made to unknowable deities and their institutional supporters. The growing use of faith-based institutions in state provision further lessens critical thinking and democratic discourse (pp. 53-61). The lessening of democratic guarantees in order to pursue millennial goals is also responsible for the overt governmental approval of torture in the war against terrorism (p. 117).

The final two features are the ones Giroux spends greater time on discussing – *Militarization at home and abroad and the replacement of democratic institutions by neo-liberal ones*. Militarization begins to shape every area of public life, and acts as cause and justification for the maintenance of entrenched hierarchies, the intensification of labour, a cultural politics based on machismo and the entry of military structures into civil society. The extent and influence of the armed forces in the United States is exemplified in George Monbiot’s quoted findings: “[the US is] now spending as much on war as it is on education, public health, housing, employment, pensions, food aid and welfare put together” (p. 65). It is no wonder, with such enormous sums of money available, that universities prioritise research for defence departments over social research and productive learning for students (p. 68). Nor should it be thought that the US is unique in this regard: Glasgow University for instance, like many other HE institutions, has spent more in recent years on promoting its Aerospace, Defence and Security Markets programmes (thanks to investment by Scottish Enterprise) than it allocated to specialist student recruitment for (its now threatened) Liberal Arts Campus in Dumfries.<sup>3</sup>

This intercession of militarized practices into other aspects of state and society, along with the closure of critical thinking and the concentration on patriotic discourse, is viewed almost entirely positively by broad sections of US society, in which the armed services can be seen to do no wrong (p. 66). Whilst John Kerry and John McCain’s candidatures for Office were not explicitly mentioned, would be indicative of the movement of a militarized ideology gaining precedence. Much of Kerry’s original electoral appeal was, supposedly, his war record, a record that the Republican campaign felt would resonate with the electorate unless it was systematically traduced, whilst absurdly promoting Bush, as a war hero. Thus, being a loyal member of the military engaged in a disastrous, destructive imperial adventure is presented by the US’s two main parties as a positive electoral asset.

Militarization with its corresponding social practices based on hierarchy, unquestioning obedience, uniformity and security inform the social practices in other state institutions. The limited constitutional rights guaranteed in a classical liberal democracy are overturned in favour of detention without trial, military courts and suspension of civil liberties. Cultural activities, such as fashion, video-games and children’s toys are embedded with militaristic values, and used from an early age to enamour youth to joining the armed forces (pp. 76-80). Greater stress on security, and fear of any abhorrent behaviour, has led to harsh punishments even for minor infractions. Schools, in particular, now prepare pupils for the proto-fascist future with draconian policing and ever greater surveillance, such as the “early morning drug-sweep at Stratford High School [in which] when the police arrived, they drew guns on students, handcuffed them and made them face the wall. No drugs were found in the raid” (p. 69).

The final feature of Giroux’s eight point characterisation of US proto-fascism is the replacement of democratic practices with neo-liberal economic structures. Welfare state provision is dismantled in favour of support for large corporations, and spaces in civil society not primarily based on extraction of surplus value are encroached upon by corporations. The end result is that “Neo-liberalism empties the public treasury, privatizes formerly public services, limits the vocabulary and imagery available to recognize anti-democratic forms of power, and reinforces narrow models of individual agency” (p. 91). Capitalism encloses the economic commons, whilst restricting individual imagination to desires based on commodity consumption.

Whilst the descriptions of the closure of critical space in the US in the years immediately after the Iraqi invasion are convincingly distressing, there are a number of areas where Giroux’s analysis is questionable. Some are easily dealt with – such as the criticism that there is little explanatory grounding as to why these eight characteristics rather than those of Brzezinski, or indeed the ten selected by Naomi Wolf,<sup>4</sup> are the pertinent measures of proto-fascism. Are these features not just an arbitrary selection of traditional gripes about a successful conservative, democratic society? A reply might be that the features Giroux highlights individually not only represent the concentration of power such that creative non-hierarchical social relations are harder to achieve and imagine, but collectively they represent a set of almost impenetrable apparatuses of domination. The horrific amalgamation of these elements seems to be collectively embraced in Iraq, and in particular the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib, which are now immortalised in the “now-infamous photos” (p. 111).

The construction of the images reflects the composers’ values – a glorified militarised western supremacism, humiliating in the name of security the non-Christian enemy. Acts are carried out in some instances, not by military personnel, but their neo-liberal surrogates, private contractors (or mercenaries) who therefore evade even the few military legal structures on the treatment of prisoners (pp.117-21). The mainstream US media’s initial Orwellian response was to ignore or excuse the torture of suspects (p. 123). The pictures were framed like pornography – that individualised, commodified version of sex – and as such the images from Abu Ghraib provide Giroux with a significant set of proto-fascist texts for discussing the wider social processes that produced them.

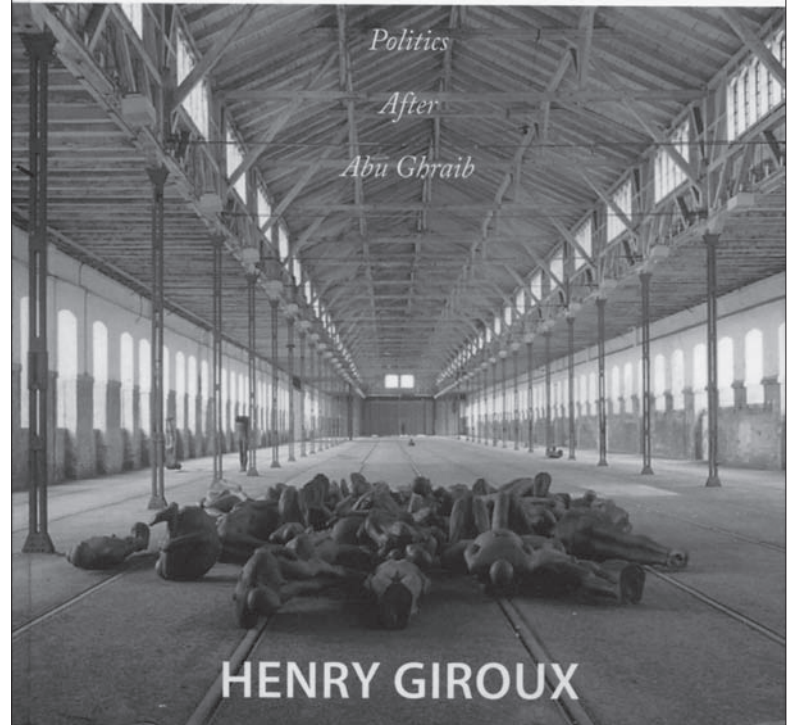
Another likely avenue of criticism is that Giroux identifies neo-liberalism as not only being compatible with fascism, but a necessary feature of the new authoritarianism. This is highly controversial, as the orthodoxy of conservative and liberal opinion, propagated by influential theorists like Kirkpatrick, Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, Karl Popper and Roger Scruton, is that the determining feature of totalitarianism was state intervention in the economy.<sup>5</sup> These opinion-formers regarded the institution of private property as a bulwark against the

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excessive concentration of powers in the state. Economic liberalism is represented as the true freedom and thus presented as the polar opposite of authoritarianism. Yet economic liberalism provides no such defence against state power. It is predicated on enforceable contracts, which require state functions – and rather than distributing power, neo-liberalism moves towards monopolisation of the economy.<sup>6</sup> Further, the values of the market economy, as Giroux points out, become increasingly dominant, thereby excluding all other principles based on different, more humane, models of productive, dignified social relationships.

Potentially stronger criticisms of Giroux's text lie precisely in his underlying hypothesis concerning the totalising power of neo-conservatism. Giroux shares with the members of the Frankfurt School, who he approvingly cites, a pessimistic and almost wholly determined account of future social developments, in which the prognosis for alternatives to dominant powers looks bleak. Giroux, like Adorno and Marcuse, fears that we are approaching a one-dimensional future composed of intellectually stunted individuals, who are manipulated by the cultural industries, endorse militarised social hierarchies and engage in relationships conceived of only in terms of market-values. This grim dystopia is subject to continual monitoring by an evermore technologically-equipped police and legitimised by an increasingly subservient, partisan and trivial media. However, whilst Giroux's account of growing authoritarianism is convincingly expressed, it is potentially disempowering, as it would suggest little space for opposition.

It is not simply wishful thinking to suggest that the existing power structures are neither as complete nor as impervious as Giroux's account would suggest. Whilst the old media of radio, film and television are increasingly dominated by a few giant corporations (p.46), new technologies have opened access to dissident voices and created new forms of communication and organisation. Whilst the military are extending their reach into greater areas of social and political life, and intervening in greater force throughout the globe, resistance to military discipline is also arising, with fewer willing to join the army in both the US and UK.<sup>7</sup> Bush's long term military objectives look increasingly unfeasible as Peter Schoomaker, the former US Chief of Staff, told Congress on December 15, 2006 that even the existing deployment policy is looking increasingly 'untenable'.<sup>8</sup> The 'overstretch' of military resources is matched by an economy incapable of fulfilling its primary neo-conservative goals of low taxation, sound national finances and extensive military interventions. Whilst this is not to suggest that the US is on the point of financial implosion, the transition to a fully proto-fascist state is unlikely to be seamless or certain.

Giroux's preferred form of resistance is *radical education*. The photographs from Abu Ghraib were iconic not just in their encapsulation of proto-

fascism, but in their public pedagogic role. Their prominence highlighted the many different sites of interpretation, as Giroux rightly stresses, there is no single way to interpret a photograph, however potent the depiction. The ability to interpret an image requires an ongoing process by a critical citizenry capable of identifying the methods by which a picture's meanings are constructed (p. 135). Giroux's critical pedagogy overtly borrows from Adorno's essay 'Education After Auschwitz', and proposes "modes of education that produce critical, engaging and free minds" (p. 141). But herein lies one of the flaws with the text: Giroux never spells out what sorts of existing institutions and social practices are practical models of this critical pedagogy. Thus, he does not indicate what methods he finds appropriate in resisting the proto-fascist onslaught nor how merely interpreting images critically would fundamentally contest hierarchical power-relationships.

Questions arise as to the adequacy of his response to the totalising threat he identifies in the main section of the book. Clearly existing academic institutions in the US are barely adequate given the campaigns against dissident academics led by David Horowitz (p.143). Giroux recounts in the final chapter, an interview conducted by Sina Rahmani, his own flight from the prestigious Penn State University to McMaster University in Canada because of managerial harassment following his public criticisms of Penn's involvement in military research (p. 186). But whilst Giroux recognises that education is far wider than what takes place in institutions of learning there is no account of what practical forms these take. Nor does Giroux give an account of why a critical pedagogy would take priority over informed aesthetic or ethical practices. Such a concentration on education would appear to prioritise those who already have (by virtue of luck or social circumstance) an already existing expertise in critical thinking, risking an oppressive power-relationship in which the expert drills the student into rigorous assessment. This lapse into the role of the strident instructor demanding the correct form of radical response, occasionally appears in Giroux's text: "within the boundaries of critical education, students have to learn the skills and knowledge to narrate their own stories [and] resist the fragmentation and seductions of market ideologies" (p. 155). Woe betide the student who prefers to narrate the story of the person sitting next to them, or fails to measure up to the 'educators' standard of critical evaluation.

These are, however, minor problems. *Against the New Authoritarianism* is a highly readable, passionate and well-researched polemic against the nexus of hierarchical institutions that have formed in the United States. It addresses the multifaceted interactions between military, media, government and education that constitute much of modern North America and bravely identifies the threat of authoritarianism.

## Notes

- 1 Kirkpatrick, J. (1979), 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary*, November 1979, available online at <<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/cm/main/viewArticle.aip?id=6189>> last accessed 26 April 2007.
- 2 The term *Fourth Estate* refers to the press, both in its explicit capacity of advocacy and in its implicit ability to frame political issues.
- 3 With admirable openness Glasgow University's 'ADS Programme: Your Key to the Aerospace, Defence and Security Markets...' is available online at <<http://www.gla.ac.uk/ads/>>, last accessed 25 April 2007. Information on the Save Glasgow University at Crichton campaign is available at <[http://www.geocities.com/glasgow\\_at\\_crichton/](http://www.geocities.com/glasgow_at_crichton/)>, last accessed 25 April, 2007.
- 4 N. Wolf, 'Fascist Steps', *The Guardian*, G2, April 24, 2007, pp. 4-11
- 5 K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Routledge: 2002); R. Scruton, *Thinkers of the New Left* (Claridge: 1998); L. von Mises, *Human Action* (W. Hodge: 1949); F. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Routledge: 2002).
- 6 For instance one company, Tesco's, provides 31% of all groceries bought in the UK, collectively the main supermarket chains account for nearly 80% of Britain's total grocery spend. 'Tesco set to unveil £2.5bn profit', Sunday, 15 April 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6557187.stm>>, last accessed 24 April 2007; J. Blythman, *Shopped: The shocking power of British supermarkets* (Harper Perennial: 2005): p. 16; pp. 303-04; see too Corporate Watch, *What's Wrong With Supermarkets*, fifth edition (Corporate Watch: 2006).
- 7 C. Myrie 'US recruitment hit by Iraq effect', BBC Online, Wednesday, 27 July 2005 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4722445.stm>>, last accessed 25 April 2007; 'Recruitment age for Army raised', BBC Online, Saturday, 6 January 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6236345.stm>>, last accessed 25 April 2007 and 'Military "faces retention crisis"', BBC Online, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6233989.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6233989.stm)>, last accessed 25 April, 2007.
- 8 D. Lyon 'How the US plans to "retake" Baghdad', BBC Online, Thursday, 8 March 2007, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/6370109.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6370109.stm)>, last accessed 25 April 2007.

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