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AUSTERITY AND THE POISON OF NEOLIBERAL MISEDUCATION

HENRY A. GIROUX

"Is a university still a university when it loses its academic autonomy?"

—JM Coetzee

Right-wing calls for austerity suggests more than the market-driven desire to punish the poor, working class, and middle class by distributing wealth upwards to the 1 percent, it also points to a politics of disposability in which the social provisions, public spheres, and institutions that nourish democratic values and social relations are being dismantled, including public and higher education.¹ Neoliberal austerity policies embody an ideology that produces both zones of abandonment and forms of social and civil death while also infusing society with a culture of cruelty. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, capitalism has learned to create host organisms and in the current historical conjuncture one of those organisms is young people, who are forced to live under the burden of crushing debt.² Austerity now drives an exchange relationship in which the only value that matters is exchange value and for students that means paying increased tuition fees that generate profits for credit companies while allow the state to lower taxes on the rich and mega corporations.³ According to Bauman, casino "capitalism proceeds through creative destruction. What is created is capitalism in a "new and improved" form—and what is destroyed is self-sustaining capacity, livelihood and dignity of its innumerable and multiplied "host organisms" into which all of us are drawn/seduced one way or another."⁴ Creative destruction armed with the death-dealing power of ruthless austerity measures benefits the financial elite while at the same time destroying the social state and setting the foundation for the punishing state, which now becomes the

¹See, for instance, Giroux (2014a) and Means (2013).

²Bauman (2011). On matters of disposability, see Bauman (2004).

³Mettler (2014).

⁴Bauman (2011).

default institution for those pushed out of the so-called American dream.⁵ Both neoliberal driven governments and authoritarian societies share one important factor: they care more about consolidating power in the hands of political, corporate, and financial elite than they do in investing in the future of young people.

Every once in a while we catch a brutal glimpse of what America has become in the narratives spun by politicians and corporate elite whose arrogance and quests for authority exceed their interest to conceal the narrow-mindedness, power-hungry blunders, cruelty, and hardship embedded in the policies they advocate.⁶ The echoes of a culture of cruelty can be heard in politicians such as Senator Tom A. Coburn, a Republican from Oklahoma, who believes that social assistance to those in need of a place to live, work, or more equitable salaries should be cut in the name of austerity measures. We hear it in the words of Representative Mike Reynolds, another Republican from Oklahoma, who insists that government bears no responsibility to improve access to college education through a state program “that provides post-secondary education scholarships to qualified low-income students.”⁷ The culture of cruelty is also on display in the policies of liberal and right-wing politicians who refuse to extend unemployment benefits, have cut \$8 billion from the food stamp program (SNAP), which primarily benefits children, and have opted out of Medicaid expansion. These decisions will be deeply consequential. A Harvard University and CUNY study...found that the lack of Medicaid expansion in these opt-out states will result in about 7,000 to 17,000 deaths a year.⁸ Similar indications of the culture of cruelty are visible in the demand on the part of right-wing billionaire Charles Koch, who reaps billions of dollars yearly from his investments, to abolish the minimum wage.⁹ We find evidence of a savage culture of cruelty in numerous policies that make clear that those who occupy the most marginalized sectors of American society – whether low-income families, communities of color, or young, unemployed, and failed consumers – are considered entirely disposable in terms of ethical considerations and the “grammar of human suffering.”¹⁰

In the name of austerity, budget cuts are enacted and fall primarily on those individuals and groups who are already disenfranchised, and will thus seriously worsen the lives of those people now suffering the most. For instance, Governor Rick Perry of Texas has enacted legislation that refuses state participation in the Obama administration’s Medicaid expansion; as a result, healthcare coverage will be denied to over 1.5 million low-income

⁵The most famous proponent of creative destruction is Schumpeter (2008). See also, Saltman (2007) and Klein (2008).

⁶See, for instance, Wolin (2008), Giroux (2011), and Giroux (2014b).

⁷Kingade (2013).

⁸Woolhandler (2014).

⁹Bucheitt (2013).

¹⁰Wilderson (2012, 2).

residents of Texas.¹¹ Another example can be seen in House Budget Committee chairman, Paul D. Ryan, proposed budget for 2014. Under the pretense of proposing a budget that refuses to spend “money we don’t have,” Ryan’s plan increases defense spending through 2024 by \$483 billion while proposing \$5.1 trillion in cuts over the next decade that would include slashing \$125 billion from the food stamp program, repealing Obamacare which would result in “reducing the number of uninsured Americans by 27 million in 2023,”¹² and making drastic cuts to social safety net programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. In addition, Ryan’s budget would eliminate “Federal subsidies for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities,...the corporation for Public Broadcasting,...the Clean Technology and Strategic Climate Fund, set up to combat global warming.”¹³ This is not merely partisan politics it is an attack on both the sustainability of the planet’s eco systems and environment and the very intellectual conditions necessary for making a democracy work through the efforts of engaged, critical citizens. The policies endorsed by Perry and Ryan are symptomatic of a much broader understanding of austerity as constitutive of a new form of neoliberalism, which is an expression of a new form of savagery and barbarism aimed at those now considered disposable in a market-centered society that has embraced a neo-Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest mentality.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the right-wing appeal to job-killing and provision-slashing now functions as an updated form of medieval torture, gutting a myriad of programs that will quickly add up to profound suffering for the many and benefits for only a small class of predatory bankers, hedge-fund managers, and financiers that leech off society.¹⁵ Austerity measures now function as a weapon to punish dissident students saddled with enormous debts, faculty who speak out against capitalist abuses and the rise of the corporate university, and administrators who refuse to be transformed into managerial technicians.¹⁶ Demos, the public policy organization, was right in stating in a recent report that “In Less than a generation, our nation’s higher education system has become a debt-for-diploma system-more than seven out of 10 college seniors now borrow to pay for college and graduate with an average debt of 29,400.”¹⁷ But students are not the only collateral damage caused by the new austerity models produced under regimes of neoliberalism.

Academics who function as critical public intellectuals have always posed a threat to authoritarian states and corporate entities, just as the institutions in which they worked were viewed as a threat to authoritarian powers. There is little doubt in the current historical moment that the ideal, however

¹¹MacLaggan (2013).

¹²Kavoussi (2014).

¹³Weisman (2014).

¹⁴Blyth (2013).

¹⁵Stiglitz (2013) and Hedges and Sacco (2014).

¹⁶Graeber (2013).

¹⁷Hiltonsmith and Draut (2014).

flawed, of the university as a democratic public sphere is truly dangerous to the apostles of casino capitalism who deride any notion of education that challenges the neoliberal assumption that higher education should be predicated on a business model, people should be treated as consumers, and capital as the only subject of history.¹⁸ At a time when the economic crisis and the increasing corporatization of the university is not matched by a crisis of ideas among the general public, market fundamentalists around the globe have gone on the offensive doing everything they can to strip education of its civic purposes and to prevent individuals from translating personal troubles into broader social issues.

For most critics of neoliberalism, this attack is primarily an economic one characterized by a massive defunding of higher education, the attempt to elimination tenure, and the transformation of higher education into an institution driven by the demands of commerce, one in which the only value that matters is exchange value. But the crisis in higher education is not only economic resulting largely from defunding and deficit reduction policies. As Gene Nichols has pointed out, universities are at risk, at least in the United States, because of a “conservative-led campaign to end higher education’s democratizing influence on the nation.”¹⁹ This suggests that the attack on higher education is not due to its failing but because it defines its mission as public.²⁰ The consequences of such increasing attacks on higher education has resulted not only in the ongoing corporatization of the university, but also a full-fledged attack on academic labor, students, and an attempt to eviscerate the radical civic imagination.

This is evident as universities turn toward corporate management models and increasingly use and exploit cheap faculty labor, while expanding the ranks of their managerial class. Modelled after a predatory neoliberal value system in which wealth and power are redistributed upward, a market oriented class of managers has largely taken over the governing structures of most institutions of higher education in the United States. As Debra Leigh Scott points out, “administrators now outnumber faculty on every campus across the country.”²¹ But there is more at stake here than metrics. Benjamin Ginsberg views this shift in governance as the rise of what he calls ominously “the all administrative university,” noting that it does not bode well for any notion of higher education as a democratic public sphere.²²

Many colleges and universities are drawing more and more upon adjunct and nontenured faculty—whose ranks now constitute 1 million out of 1.5 million faculty—many of whom occupy the status of indentured servants who are overworked, lack benefits, receive little or no administrative support, and

¹⁸Giroux (2013).

¹⁹Nichol (2008, A50).

²⁰See Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux (2004), Aronowitz (2008), Susan Searls Giroux (2010), Bailey and Freedman (2011), Olson and Worsham (2012), and Harward (2013).

²¹Scott (2012).

²²Ginsberg (2011).

are paid salaries that increasingly qualify them for food stamps.²³ Students increasingly fare no better in sharing the status of a subaltern class beholden to neoliberal policies and values, and largely treated as consumers for whom education has become little more than a service. Too many students are buried under huge debts that have become a major source of celebration by the collection industry because it allows them to cash in on their misfortune. Similarly, debt has become a form of subjectivity, a normalized form of servitude that imposes a truncated notion of agency in which debt controls one's life and one's entire time is now subject to the debtor-creditor relationship.²⁴ Under the regime of neoliberal education, misery breeds a combination of contempt and source of profits for the banks and other financial industries.²⁵ Jerry Aston, a member of that industry, wrote in a column after witnessing a protest rally by students criticizing their mounting debt that he "couldn't believe the accumulated wealth they represent—for our industry."²⁶ And, of course, this type of economic injustice is taking place in an economy in which rich plutocrats such as the infamous union-busting Koch brothers "made enough money [in 2012] in one second to feed one homeless woman for an entire year."²⁷ Workers, students, youth, and the poor are all considered expendable in this neoliberal global economy. Yet the one institution, education, that offers the opportunities for students to challenge these anti-democratic tendencies, is under attack in ways that are unparalleled, at least in terms of the scope and intensity of the assault by the corporate elite and other economic fundamentalists.²⁸

Casino capitalism does more than infuse market values into every aspect of higher education; it also wages a full-fledged assault on public goods, democratic public spheres, and the role of education in creating an informed and enlightened citizenry. When former presidential candidate and Senator Rick Santorum argued that intellectuals were not wanted in the Republican Party, he was articulating what has become common sense in a society wedded to narrow instrumentalist values, ignorance as a political tool, and a deep seated fear of civic literacy and a broad-based endorsement of the commons. Critical thinking and a literate public have become dangerous to those who want to celebrate orthodoxy over dialogue, emotion over reason, and ideological certainty over thoughtfulness.²⁹ Hannah Arendt's warning that "it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think"³⁰ at the heart of authoritarian regimes is now embraced as a fundamental tenet of right-wing politicians and pundits and increasingly has become a matter

²³Hart Research Associates (2011); Street, Maisto, Merves, and Rhoades (2012).

²⁴Hardt and Negri (2012); see also, Graeber (2013).

²⁵Ross (2014).

²⁶Martin and Lehren (2012, A1).

²⁷Buchheit (2013).

²⁸Ibid., Giroux (2014a).

²⁹For an excellent defense of critical thinking not merely as a skill, but as a crucial foundation for any democratic society, see Jensen (2013).

³⁰Cited in Bernstein (2005, 7-8).

of common sense for the entertainment industry and the dominant media, all primary modes of an education industry that produces consumers, smothers the country in the empty fog of celebrity culture, and denounces democracy as tantamount to the enemy of free-market fundamentalism. How else to explain the willingness of so many people today to give up every vestige of privacy to the social media, the government, and anyone else interested in collecting data for the most despicable and anti-democratic purposes. Self-interest does more than embrace a new culture of narcissism; it empties out any viable notion of the social, compassion, and the ethical imagination.³¹

Right-wing appeals to austerity provide the rationale for slash-and-burn policies intended to deprive government financed social and educational programs of the funds needed to enable them to work, if not survive. Along with health care, public transportation, Medicare, food stamp programs for low-income children, and a host of other social protections, higher education is being defunded as part of a larger scheme to dismantle and privatize all public services, goods, and spheres. The passion for public values has given way to the ruthless quest for profits and the elevation of self-interests over the common good. The educational goal of expanding the capacity for critical thought and the outer limits of the imagination have given way to the instrumental desert of a mind-deadening audit culture. But there is more at work here than the march toward privatization and the never-ending search for profits at any cost; there is also the issue of wasteful spending on a bloated war machine, the refusal to tax fairly the rich and corporations, the draining of public funds for the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ongoing consolidation of class power in the hands of the top 1 percent.

The deficit argument and the austerity policies advocated in its name is a form of class warfare designed largely for the state to be able to redirect revenue in support of the commanding institutions of the corporate-military-industrial complex and away from funding higher education and other crucial public services. The extent of the budget reduction assault is such that in 2012 "states reduced their education budgets by \$12.7 billion."³² Liberals and conservatives justify such cuts by pointing to declining revenues brought in by the state but what is missing from this argument is that one major reason for the decline is because of right-wing policies and legislation that lowers the taxes of the rich and major corporations. Of course, the burden of such reductions falls upon poor minority and other low-income students who will not be able to afford the tuition increases that will compensate for the loss of state funding. As the political state is replaced by the corporate state, tuition rises, the ranks of the poor expand, more social problems are criminalized and the punishing state blooms as a default register for potential dissent. Under the aegis of austerity, the defunding of higher education has become symptomatic of the broader neoliberal sweeping abandonment of long term

³¹See, for instance, Bauman (2013).

³²Buchheit (2012).

investments in public goods coupled with the exorcism of the other who in this case happen to be low income and poor minority students. The voraciousness and homogenizing force of casino capitalism is incompatible with any viable notion higher education as a public good and “is now inseparable from many other forms of dispossession and social ruin occurring globally.”³³

What has become clear in light of such assaults is that many universities and colleges have become unapologetic accomplices to corporate, interests, values and power, and in doing so increasingly regard social problems as either irrelevant or make them invisible.³⁴ The ongoing transformation of higher education both in the United States and abroad under the regime of neoliberal principles is evident in a number of registers. These include: decreased support for programs of study that are not business oriented; reduced funds for research that does not increase profit; the replacement of shared forms of governance with rigid business management models; the lessening of financial support for academic fields that promote critical thinking rather than an entrepreneurial culture; the ongoing exploitation of faculty labor; and the use of purchasing power as the vital measure of a student’s identity, worth, and access to higher education.³⁵ In addition, many universities are now occupied by security forces whose central message is that dissent and protest, however peaceful, will be squelched through violence. Leftover weapons from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan have found a home on many college campuses that increasingly look as if they have become potential war zones.³⁶ These weapons stand as a grim remind that they could be used against all those students who question authority, imagine a more democratic role for the university, and connect learning to social change. Universities are increasingly becoming dead zones of the imagination, managed by a class of swelling bureaucrats, inhabited by faculty who constitute a new class of indentured, if not sometime willing, technicians, and students who are demeaned as customers and saddled with crippling debts. Not all faculty and students fit into this description. Some raise their voices in protests, others enjoy the benefits of being accomplices to power, and others get lost in the orbits of privatized interests or academic specialization. The university is a site of struggle and beset by many contradictions, but I don’t believe it is an exaggeration to say that higher education since the late 1970s has been hijacked by a mix of political and economic fundamentalist forces that have worked hard to empty higher education of what it means to truly educate young people to be knowledgeable, critical, thoughtful, and sensitive to the plight of others and the larger society.

Most importantly, higher education too often informs a deadening dystopian vision of corporate America and old style authoritarian regimes

³³Crary (2013, 18).

³⁴See Giroux (2007).

³⁵See, for instance, Reich (2012). For a brilliant argument regarding the political and economic reasons behind the defunding and attack on higher education, see Newfield (2008).

³⁶Balko (2013).

that impose pedagogies of repression and disciplined conformity associated with societies that have lost any sense of ethical responsibility and respect for equality, public values, and justice. The democratic imagination has been transformed into a data machine that marshals its inhabitants into the neoliberal dream world of babbling consumers and armies of exploitative labor whose ultimate goal is to accumulate capital and initiate faculty and students into the brave new surveillance/punishing state that merges Orwell's Big Brother with Huxley's mind-altering soma.³⁷

One consequence of this ongoing disinvestment in higher education is the expansion of a punishing state that increasingly criminalizes a range of social behaviors, wages war on the poor instead of poverty, militarizes local police forces, harasses poor minority youth, and spends more on prisons than on higher education. The punishing state produces fear and sustains itself on moral panics. Dissent gives way to widespread insecurity, uncertainty, and an obsession with personal safety.³⁸ Precarity has become an organizing principle of a social order so as to legitimate and expand the ranks of those considered disposable while destroying those public sites that give voice to the narratives of those marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology. Public places are now militarized and those spaces once designed for dialogue, critique, informed exchange and dissent are now occupied by the police and other security forces who have become the most visible register of the surveillance-security state.³⁹

Political, moral, and social indifference is the result, in part, of a public that is increasingly constituted within an educational landscape that reduces thinking to a burden and celebrates civic illiteracy as foundational for negotiating a society in which moral disengagement and political corruption go hand in hand.⁴⁰ The assault on the university is symptomatic of the deep educational, economic, and political crisis facing the United States. It is but one lens through which to recognize that the future of democracy depends on achieving the educational and ethical standards of the society we inhabit.⁴¹

This lapse of the US public into a political and moral coma is also induced, in part, by an ever expanding, mass-mediated celebrity culture that trades in hype and sensation. It is also accentuated by a governmental apparatus that sanctions modes of training that undermine any viable notion of critical schooling and public pedagogy. While there is much being written about how unfair the Left is to the Obama administration, what is often forgotten by these liberal critics is that Obama has aligned himself with educational practices and policies as instrumentalist and anti-intellectual as they are politically reactionary, and therein lies one viable reason for not supporting

³⁷See Giroux (forthcoming).

³⁸Leopold (2012). On this issue, see also the classic work by Davis (2003) and Alexander (2012).

³⁹Giroux (2014c).

⁴⁰Leopold (2012).

⁴¹Bauman (2001, 4).

his initiatives and administration.⁴² What liberals refuse to entertain is that the Left is correct in attacking Obama for his cowardly retreat from a number of progressive issues and his dastardly undermining of civil liberties. In fact, they do not go far enough in their criticisms. Often even progressives miss that Obama's views on what type of formative educational culture that is necessary to create critically engaged and socially responsible citizens are utterly reactionary and provide no space for the nurturance of a radically democratic imagination. Hence, while liberals point to some of Obama's progressive policies – often in a New Age discourse that betrays their own supine moralism – they fail to acknowledge that Obama's educational policies do nothing to contest, and are in fact aligned with, his weak-willed compromises and authoritarian policies. In other words, Obama's educational commitments undermine the creation of a formative culture capable of questioning authoritarian ideas, modes of governance and reactionary policies. The question is not whether Obama's policies are slightly less repugnant than his right-wing detractors. On the contrary, it is about how educators and others should engage politics in a more robust and democratic way by imagining what it would mean to work collectively and with "slow impatience" for a new political order outside of the current moderate and extreme right-wing politics and the debased, uncritical educational apparatus that supports it.⁴³

The transformation of higher education into an adjunct of corporate control conjures up the image of a sorcerer's apprentice, of an institution that has become delusional in its infatuation with neoliberal ideology, values, and modes of instrumental pedagogy. Universities now claim that they are providing a service and in doing so not only demean any substantive notion of governance, research, and teaching, but abstract education from any sense of civic responsibility. Neoliberal ideology and modes of governance represent a toxin that supplies a predatory class of zombies who produce dead zones of the imagination, spaces in which an audit culture triumphs over critical thinking, informed debate, decent working conditions, and a vision in which social bonds and civic responsibility are central to learning itself. Higher education reneged on enlightenment ideals and lost its sense of democratic mission but it also increasingly offers no defense to the "totalitarianism that haunts the modern ideal of political mancipation."⁴⁴ Driven by an audit culture and increasingly oblivious to the demands of a democracy for an informed and critical citizenry, neoliberalism now devours its children, disregards its faculty, and resembles an institution governed by myopic accountants who should be ashamed of what they are proud of. The university needs to be reclaimed as a crucial public sphere where administrat-

⁴²See, for instance, Solnit (2012). Tom Dispatch refers to this article as a call for hope over despair. It should be labeled as a call for accommodation over the need for a radical democratic politics. For an alternative to this politics of accommodation, see the works of Stanley Aronowitz, Chris Hedges, Henry Giroux, Noam Chomsky, and others.

⁴³This term comes from Daniel Bainsäid. See Budgen (2010).

⁴⁴Halberstam (1999, 1).

ors, faculty, and students can imagine what a free and substantive democracy might look like and what it means to make education relevant to such a crucial pedagogical and political task. Universities must press the claim for creating social bonds and public spheres in which democracy is viewed as a struggle over agency and new modes of communal relations that refuse to reduce social interaction to a form of social combat and Social Darwinism as the organizing principle of politics and everyday life. What must be upheld by educators and others interested in preserving the link between education and democracy is that “higher education [must] remain a public good—with all of us relying and depending on the system not just for the education of doctors, nurses, teachers, accountants and other professionals—but to provide the critical thinking that is the lifeblood of our democracy.”⁴⁵ Any viable notion of a radical democracy needs critical and engaged agents capable of developing the disposition and capacities to resist repressive attacks on thinking, feeling, and desiring so they can create the conditions for them to not only shape ideological, economic, and political forces that govern their everyday lives, but also so they can imagine alternative futures and horizons of possibility. Such horizons of possibility can be glimpsed despite all the forces aligned against it in those places all over the globe where young people refuse the dictates of authoritarians and the savagery of predatory capitalism and its politics of austerity. Austerity is the ideological and policy hammer that now drives neoliberalism assault on higher education. This is not merely an economic tool but also an ideological weapon used to depoliticize any viable sense of critical agency and the institutions that still function as a public good. Faculty, students, unions, workers, educators, intellectuals and others need to organize to create a world-wide movement for the defense of public good and high on its agenda should be the recognition that austerity policies are really about the consolidation of class power and should be understood as one of the foundational elements of the new authoritarianism. The stakes are high because the struggle is not simply against austerity measures but the institutions and economic order that produce them. One place to begin is with a new sense of politics driven by a notion of educated hope. Hope turns radical when it exposes the violence of neoliberalism—acts of state and corporate aggression against democracy, humanity, and ecological stability itself. But hope does more than critique, dismantle, and expose the ideologies, values, institutions, and social relations that are pushing so many countries today into authoritarianism, austerity, violence, and war. Hope can energize and mobilize groups, neighbourhoods, communities, campuses, and networks of people to articulate and advance insurgent discourses in the movement toward developing higher education as part of a broader insurrectional democracy. Hope is an important political and subjective register that can not only enable people to think beyond the neoliberal austerity machine—the chronic and intergenerational injustices deeply structured into

⁴⁵Hiltonsmith and Draut (2014).

all levels of society – but also to advance forms of egalitarian community that celebrate the voice, well-being, inherent dignity, and participation of each person as an integral thread in the ever-evolving fabric of living democracy.

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