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## **Public schools and the struggle for democracy: insights from the American context**

*Marta Cordini\**

Henry Giroux is one of the first fifty educationalists of modernity according to “Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education: from Piaget to the Present” (Palmer 2001). Inspired by a strong democratic worldview, he is currently holding the Global TV Network Chair Professorship at McMaster University in the English and Cultural Studies Department (Canada). He is followed by many scholars in the area of cultural studies, youth studies, critical pedagogy, popular culture, media culture, social theory, and the politics of higher and public education. Recently his last book has been translated and published for the Italian audience (*Educazione e crisi dei valori pubblici. Le sfide per insegnanti, studenti ed educazione pubblica*, Editore La Scuola, Brescia, 2014) and it has worth paying attention to his thesis within a general frame of decadence of the “welfarist” discourse about public education (Grimaldi, Serpieri, 2013).

In this book Giroux provides a critical and passionate discussion on the current conditions of public school in United States, touching a wide range of issues that are at stake also in many European countries. The values of public education, along with the increasing privatization of schools, the need for accountability, the crisis of the role of teachers and the progressive drifting towards a pedagogy deprived from its theoretical background are

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recurrent topics in his book. Giroux's ideas are preceded by a likewise captivating introduction written by Fulvio De Giorgi, a well-known expert in Cultural History of Education, who sees in this volume a chance to better understand the negative effects of neo-liberalism on schools and to feed the critical thought. De Giorgi highlights the international relevance that should be recognized to this author, because the originality and the potential impact of his thought.

The author articulates a lucid and effective attack to the education reforms that have involved American public schools in the last decades. These reforms would be part of a wider design to assault democratic values having its roots in the neoliberal turn in 80s, with the advent of market fundamentalism in the United States and the growing disdain for the welfare state. This tendency has not known a setback neither in front of the economic and financial crisis nor with the changing from the republican to democratic wing in the governmental leadership.

According to Giroux, not only the education system is threatened nowadays by the neo-liberal vision but also the democracy itself, especially considering the role of schools in shaping future adult citizens.

These reforms, that have their counterparts also in Europe, are part of a wider project aiming to discredit public values in general and to strengthen instead principles such as individualism, privatization, business-oriented motivation, competition and efficiency. Individual achievement is invoked to justify education as a private right rather than as a public good: education is firstly and, sometimes uniquely, considered the mean to achieve self-realization in terms of economic and professional success. Money and power are thus the values conveyed by these new forms of pedagogy: they are the goals students are expected to aspire to. Human personal growth, capacity of thinking critically, ability of calling into question the authority, self-expression do not appear into the current political and public discourse on education.

Before entering more in details about the book's contents, it seems unavoidable to highlight the writing style of this author, featuring also his articles, that is passionate, insistent and dense. It is a kind of language hard to find in recent academic works and that reveals since the beginning the author's commitment to civic justice. Nevertheless, this glowing and intense style does not affect negatively the comprehension, but on the contrary, it enforces what Giroux is stating, involving the reader deeply into

the issues and challenging him in expanding reflections on single educational practices to wider and more global issues.

Passionate attacks are always accompanied by examples and cases taken from the political and public life, so that the reader can easily follow his arguments and acquire a more detailed knowledge about actors involved, included the unexpected ones. In fact, a wide range of public actors from the political, intellectual and business spheres appears in these pages, to be criticized, attacked or praised. The way in which different people and fields are involved into the debate around education and public values provides a clear idea to what extent this issue involves much more than schools or the education system.

The tone goes hand in hand with the continuous recall to ethical and moral values, in contrast with the strengths that, according to Giroux, move neo-liberalism approaches to education and in general, what he calls “*casino capitalism*” (p. 58). His arrows do not spare anybody: he reports how the attack to public schools is in fact managed and sustained by rightist and leftist politicians, Obama administration included, millionaire businesspersons, hedge-fund managers, called “financial barbarians” in his last article (Giroux, 2014), as well as so called philanthropists and intellectuals who have abdicated to their integrity. This neo-liberal approach aims to apply market’s logic to the school that should function, by consequence, in the name of the profit and should be evaluated as a business activity.

According to Giroux, teachers have been the first victims of this turn: he, since the first chapter, expresses his significant worry about the new teaching practices that are spreading all around schools and that conceive teachers almost as mere technicians whose task is reduced to standardize and quantify knowledge and learning of students. He sees in these practices, usually presented as innovative and reliable in terms of accountability, the empirical tool for the impoverishment of the pedagogical practice: they totally lack, in fact, of phantasy, creativity and imagination. Here the author gives his contribution to the debate on the opposition between creativity and measurement, highlighting the need for the first one and the excess in using the second one as an answer to the demand for equity. This issue is challenging also several European countries, where in the last decades the quasi-market orientation has introduced competition between schools (Pandolfini, 2013) and, by consequence, standards of efficiency and methods to measure schools’

performance. This tendency has to cope with the increasing pluralism characterized schools in terms of social and ethnic background and empirical evidence prove that it does not seem capable to deal with this diversity by respecting it and granting equity as expected by a democratic system (Colombo, 2013).

Giroux brings repeatedly *high-stakes tests*<sup>1</sup> as an example of these new pedagogical practices that conceive accountability as the current priority of education systems (Randall, 2008; Smith, 2014). As mentioned above, personal and immeasurable skills of teachers and students hardly find a place in these new practices of standardization (Landri, 2014). In addition, as some researchers has proved, they seem to lead to teachers' or students' corruption and misleading practices in order to prevent sanctions or, in case of *charter schools*, closure. This is not a problem limited to the American context, if we consider the phenomenon of *cheating* reported in some national tests, as INVALSI in Italy or European ones, as Pisa or IEA evaluation (Ferrer-Esteban, 2013; Lucifora & Tonello, 2014). Giroux reports some extreme practices, such as paying students to study more in order to pass the texts (O'Neil et al., 2005; Eisenkopf, 2011). Empirical evidences from several studies support the author's attack to these instruments of evaluation (Moll, 2004; Sharon et al., 2007).

Besides scientific evidences concerning the limits of these tests or other similar practices, the mistrust of public opinion, especially from parents, has emerged as well in many countries. As Giroux highlights (2014) in his more recent article "Barbarians at the Gates: Authoritarianism and the Assault on Public Education", social movements are arising their voices against these tests and against other similar measures. For example, in various American states, parents have joined the NEA (National Education Association) in the fight against testing. Other kinds of civic and political engagement have arisen around the country, such as the National Centre for Fair and Open Testing, whose executive director has reported in an interview<sup>2</sup> that a recent survey of the Colorado Education Association

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<sup>1</sup> Testing were firstly introduced as a mandatory practice in schools in 2001 by the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act, signed by the President Bush. At the core of this law there were a set of measure leading significant changes to the educational landscape (Education Week, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> <http://neatoday.org/2014/06/17/the-high-stakes-testing-culture-how-we-got-here-how-we-get-out/>

found that teachers spend 30% of their time on preparing students to tests and on testing. He also adds that it is not unusual for districts to test their students ten times a year. Giroux is supportive of these kinds of initiatives and he also quotes the European experiences in Greece, United Kingdom and France calling attention to the major awareness characterizing European protests. According to his opinion, European activism is capable of linking the protests on public education to the defence of democracy in a more explicit and conscious way than American movements.

From the third chapter, Giroux focuses his attention on the spreading phenomenon of "*charter schools*" that, despite all the good intentions they officially are meant for, he basically considers an intermediate passage to transform public schools into private ones, a means to radicalize existing inequalities (based on race, income, family education, etc.) and to spread poor and meaningless pedagogical practices. Charter schools have been promoted in the beginning of '90s as the most radical change in the American education system. "By allowing citizens to start new public schools (or converting existing ones), freeing the schools from state law and school district policies, and holding them accountable for results and "customer" satisfaction, proponents hope charter schools programs will stimulate the formation of promising new educational options for children. And if the state money that would have paid for children to attend conventional schools follows them to charter schools, advocates argue that the programs will place competitive pressure on regular public schools and spur system wide improvement" (Hassel B.C., 1999, p. 1).

Supporters of charter schools claim that they might increase student learning, promote educational innovation as well as the diversification of educational programs and learning environments, expand opportunities for teachers to become more involved in program design and school governance (Lubienski, 2003; Betts & Tang, 2008). Giroux instead conceives *charter schools* only as another instrument to introduce a neo-liberal business-oriented education into schools, with the final scope to transform them into private schools. After more than a decade from their introduction, several researches have in fact proved (Bifulco et al., 2006) that students' performances in charter schools are not better than in public schools and that they do not seem suitable to fight inequalities or to provide better opportunities in terms of choices and performances to disadvantaged social classes. Some scholars have found, for example, that this could be a consequence of the elevated students' turn-over, that can be "an unintended

negative side effect of school choice” (Bifulco et al., 2006, p. 88). Other studies, however, demonstrate how proficiency differences are affected by charter schools’ circumstances: their age, the laws under which they operate, and the student population they face (Hoxby, 2004). Evidences on charter schools functioning are in fact eligible to consistently differ according to the local environment where they are set (Wohlstetter et al., 1995).

Nevertheless, it is also true that if, on the one hand, charter schools benefit of much more autonomy than public schools, on the other hand, they are requested to respect some standards of performance (measured primarily by high-stake tests) otherwise they are eligible to be closed, which means in many cases to be transformed in private schools.

The author is not only considerably sceptical about the pedagogical practices promoted in these schools, he is also worried about the kinds of interests these schools attract. Charter schools seem to capture the attention of many stakeholders such as hedge fund managers and foundations that sees in this system a chance to make money or become more influential and powerful on the political ground. Giroux often highlights how the involvement of these actors into the educational field is considered normal and well accepted by know, while in his opinion the influence of these actors represents a serious threaten for the autonomy and the integrity of education. These actors, in fact, bring into schools values typically belonging to the free market economy and an elitist, selective and formal ideal equality in education, brought to its extreme consequences. Dropout and failure, in this neo-liberalist perspectives, are no more conceived as shortcomings to face, but rather as the result of a healthy and welcomed selection and competition, within the framework of “the race to the top” approach promoted by Obama. These kinds of stakeholders brings to the stage a set of interests that are by nature against the public values. These economic and private interests are sustained also by policies that, as Giroux stated in his last article (2014), “benefit the bankers, corporations and the financial elite result in massive inequities in wealth, income and power and increasingly determine how the US public views both public education and the needs of young people. As market economies are transformed into market societies, the investment in human capital such as young people has been replaced by an overdetermined emphasis on investing in economic capital”.

The concern of Henry Giroux about the diffusion of market-oriented values among the schools is well summarized by the following questions: could students, who are educated to think that the profit is the best motivation, to call into question an educational system where “disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, classical sciences are taken into consideration only if considered instruments of economic development” (Nussbaum, 2010). Would these students, became adults, be able to recognize the importance of values that cannot be commercialized? Would they find a place for values such as honesty, civility, trust, truth, compassion and responsibility for others?

The curricula proposed by this new pedagogy without theory are defined by Giroux *business curricula* that promote “political, intellectual and social ignorance”. These curricula would favour already advantaged students and would strengthening already existing shortcomings of marginalized students in terms of opportunities. This means enhancing competition without granting equal chances. This also means fostering the so-called *school to prison pipeline* effect that indicates the almost direct and automatic passage from the educational to the retention system for the already disadvantaged students.

Thus the author, concluding his attack to this neo-liberal trend in reforming schools, identifies three victims. The first one is the capacity of thinking critically: the persistent idea of the need for standardization and measuring lead to underestimate and to neglect the free thought, the critical capacity, the ability of doubting about the *status quo*. Secondly, the autonomy of teachers, their independency, adequate working conditions, power and instruments that would permit to work with creativity in class tend to disappear in this approach that reduces teachers to technicians. Finally, as previously mentioned, the third victim consist of marginalized students (especially because of race or social class).

At the end of book, Henry Giroux introduces a topic that requires a deep reflection from whoever works into the academic field and that does not concern only the American context, but it involves directly also European countries. He calls in fact for a major public engagement of intellectuals.

Against the quite commonly shared idea that academics do not have a public function and do not belong to the political world sustained by

intellectual such as Stanley Fish<sup>3</sup>, he opposed three unpopular arguments. Firstly, academics must express their opinion on public issues; secondly, they should refuse and combat the idea that “clarity”, “simplicity” and “easiness” are the best indicators that a writer has successfully reached a public audience with an average education. Finally, intellectuals must take seriously into account the issue about their accessibility and reflect on the communication in order to combine the scientific and intellectual rigor with the effectiveness of the language used in order to share their knowledge.

Giroux thus challenges intellectuals to find the way to communicate off the academic world without renouncing to the complexity and to the rigour of their work. This of course means that academics are expected to adhere to a wider political project that implies the recognition of their responsibility with regard to public matters. In his and other scholars’ opinions (Smith, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), intellectuals must participate to public life and they should seriously engage themselves in understanding how to communicate their thought without sacrifice its complexity: his models of intellectuals comprise figures such as Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Hanna Arendt who are still engaged in public discussions. Unfortunately, as he denounces, these intellectuals are often marginalized by the public opinion, so that their opinions are neglected or considered subversive.

The volume ends with a homage to Paulo Freire (p. 173), father of the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” and one of the leading thinker of the critical pedagogy that promotes at the same time social consciousness and social change. In Giroux’s opinion, education is strictly connected to politics and an education system has the responsibility to be aware of this connection and reflexive on it. Recalling Freire, Giroux stands for a political pedagogy putting into the foreground the history, the memory, the relationships, the justice and the ethics as the main issues of the democratic struggles.

In his defence of public and democratic values, Giroux sometimes tends to become rhetorical and repetitive, indulging on the same concepts in different chapters. Repetitions of course can be helpful in stressing some issue, but they risk reducing the reader’s interest and slowing down the whole discourse. Nevertheless, the continuous recall to already mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish is one of the leading American intellectual. He is an American literary theorist and legal scholar.

concepts is quite surely part of his style that in this book is more devoted to the denounce rather than to the scientific dissemination.

In conclusion, this reading would be particularly valuable for Italian policy-makers who have apparently embraced uncritically the *accountability* paradigm that looks so successful currently. This book might provide an insightful reflection on theories and practices that lie behind the neo-liberal approach revealing how it usually leads to a superficial understanding of the school reality and, by consequence to partial and unsuitable solutions. In addition, it arises also ethical and moral issues that have been neglected by the recent educational reforms (see for example “La buona scuola” document <https://labuonascuola.gov.it/>) and approaches, as if education would not be involved or touched by such topics.

“La Scuola” Publisher with this publication has approached the Italian public to an upstream author and his unconventional thought, providing an original contribution to a fundamental debate, not only for the school system, but for the whole society, since it is democracy itself to be at stake.

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