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Appetite for Destruction: America's War Against Itself

By Robin Goodman
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Nobody better than Henry Giroux can piece together the history of the present and show the intersecting lines that course through our politics and culture. Giving us a new and vibrant twist on the current events that capture the headlines, Giroux's new book *America at War With Itself* issues a dire warning about what he calls "these dark times," but at the same time offers a set of actions that run counter, from pedagogical practices to social movements, Black Lives Matter, labor organizing, community building, civic education, historical memory, and cultural work – or, in his own words, "insurrectional democracy."

Rather than understanding racism, violence, citizen surveillance, educational divestment, and rising corporate power as each a boxed-in set of events or singular issues, *America at War With Itself* proves, insightfully, that all these forces of political culture combine and so, as a result, resistances can also unite around a common target, emphasizing the connections.

As he writes, "An expansive understanding… links the calls for a living wage and environmental justice to calls for access to quality health care and the elimination of the conditions fostering

assaults by the state against people of color, immigrants, workers, and women" (260-261). With his characteristic inspirational turns of phrase, creative analyses, and intensity of critique, Giroux has written a must-read, hard-hitting book that turns our present inside-out, allowing us to see the terrifying workings of power and oppression while still identifying the faultlines of hope and possibility.

Giroux calls our contemporary nexus of power "authoritarianism," a set of trends linked to neoliberalism – the strengthening of the corporate state, the end of the social contract, the depoliticization of democratic public spheres. Though he starts by reading "authoritarianism" in the figure of Donald Trump's ascendency, he by no means resorts to the kind of facile, knee-jerk repetition of belated angst and shock exhibited in more mainstream commentary. He clearly understands "authoritarianism" in a deeper historical sense of growing militarism, commercialization (which he brilliantly calls "disimagination machines"), and the disappearance of independent spaces for public deliberation, leading to racism, ethnocentricism, xenophobia, an attack on youth, a culture of the spectacle, and a violent cult of strong-arm masculinity. Trump, Giroux says, is not the exception. Instead, he is the manifestation of a society "at war with itself."

For example, referring to the Michigan emergency management's diversion of water from the Flint River, leading to lead running through the taps of Flint's citizens' homes, Giroux angrily bemoans "a society that finds it more profitable to poison children than to give them a decent life" as well as "a society that chooses to incarcerate people rather than to educate them" (12). In other words, even as the United State pretends to concern itself with civilians as it bombards sites in Iraq and Syria, it is responsible for creating war-like conditions that threaten the well-being and safety of children within its own borders. Giroux does not see the events in Flint as isolated events. Instead, he understands them as part of a longer historical pattern, where financial elites disinvested from Flint, the EPA turned its back, and the Michigan state political authorities moved funds away from black cities and schools in order to shore up state budgets after an era of corporate flight, even before the water crisis. In this, the events in Flint parallel events in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, where the Bush administration refused support for needed infrastructure even before the floods, as well as events in Ferguson, Missouri, where urban degradation and job loss were met with more policing, leading to the shooting of an unarmed black man, Michael Brown. Giroux interprets such incidents, additionally, as part of a war on youth that includes the coordinated attacks in Paris in 2015. Here, years of what he calls "soft war" – or repressive policies that deny agency to Muslim youth through humiliation, scapegoating, and intimidation — make it easier for ISIS to recruit young followers willing to shed blood in their name. For Giroux, because youth have a claim on the future, they open the imagination to futures that are different, and as such often find themselves the target of inordinate repression.

Giroux sees similar trends in the growth in gun violence and mass shootings, which he calls, following Guns N' Roses, an "appetite for destruction." Gun violence, remarks Giroux, is for the most part publically blamed on terrorists or on the mentally ill, even as statistically, a large preponderance of perpetrators fall into neither category. On the one hand, Giroux instead attributes mass shootings to the ability of the gun industry to control legislation through lobbying and thus avoid regulation. On the other hand, gun violence is the product of a massive

disinformation machine that produces fears of people of color or of immigrants when insecurities are really the result of cuts in government supports for health care, schools, and communities. In such a setting, without democratic recourse, all politics, as Hannah Arendt warned against, gets reduced to violence.

In addition, Giroux remarks on a slew of cultural products, TV shows, Hollywood movies, news programs, and video games, that falsify information about the dangers we face while pleasuring and reveling in these violent events, producing "commercial pornographies of violence" (156) and normalizing its occurrences. "Representations of bodies in fear, panic, vulnerability, and pain," Giroux elucidates, "increasingly override narratives of social justice; pure entertainment, as a return to the hyper-real, enshrines audio-visual representations of the gruesome, opening up a new phase in the contemporary use of images as mechanisms of social control, coercion, and psychological war" (177). Not only do corporate arms sellers profit as our cities enter into their crossfire, creating an increasing state demand for corporate surveillance systems, but media companies also draw substantial revenues by denying ethical considerations in the perpetuation of violence and generating images of deadly threats coming from everywhere, turning victims into monsters.

Giroux of course does not leave us in the throes of such an intolerable vision but rather makes us responsible agents in the formation of critical subjects and active citizens. For Giroux, learning to interpret the world is the first step towards intervening in it, and in intervening, changing it. "Educated hope," he concludes, "believes that substantial changes for justice and a better future can only take place in collective struggle and that such change must begin by making power visible, connecting the dots, and confronting the conditions of injustice" (251). This is exactly what Giroux models in this book. In all, *America at War With Itself* is wide-ranging in its analyses of power without ever resorting to shallow cynicism; it is accessible and passionate while still delving meticulously and perceptively into the public concerns that are shaping our political identities of the present. Giroux continues as a visionary.