

**Youth in a Suspect Society:
Democracy or Disposability?**

by Henry A. Giroux

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Reviewed by Mike Larsen

Democracy, as a political and cultural framework, must be continuously renewed through participation, reproduced through education, and reinvented through critique. If it is to live up to its promise, it must also be protected from both the authoritarian impulses of states and the reductionist calculations of the market. For Henry A. Giroux, this ongoing project of engagement and struggle hinges on the operation of robust public spheres populated by politically literate and active citizens. It follows that this sort of informed engagement is itself dependent upon practices of critical education, and on sustained social investment in young people, and by extension, in the future. The current state and trajectory of democracy in a given society can therefore be assessed by examining the way it envisions and treats its youth.

Starting from this premise, Giroux, in *Youth in a Suspect Society*, sets out to evaluate the prospects for American democracy at a time when “[y]oung people have become a generation of suspects in a society destroyed by the merging of market fundamentalism, consumerism, and militarism” (p.12). His particular focus in this text is on the intersection of two trends: 1) the relentless commodification of youth culture – and ultimately, of youth themselves – and 2) the operation of a biopolitics¹ of disposability that increasingly exposes youth to the coercive and exclusionary mechanisms of the punishing state. In naming the contemporary socio-cultural context a ‘suspect society’, Giroux draws attention to the tendency to construct young people – and particularly urban, racialized youth – as pervasive sources of potential danger, destined to be socialized as docile consumers or managed through surveillance and control.

The book begins with a discussion of neoliberalism and the politics of disposability, understood in relation to the plight of youth. Giroux draws on Zygmunt Bauman’s (2004) text *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, which explores the ways in which globalization actively produces – and then manages and disposes of – populations deemed superfluous and excludable. Having set the stage, the book then proceeds in sections to discuss youth and the pedagogy of commodification, education and

the youth-crime complex, and youth and academic unfreedom. Giroux concludes by returning to his critique of neoliberalism and expanding on it through a careful engagement with the literature on biopolitics. The conclusion argues for the development of a “[b]iopolitics in the interest of global democracy”, defined as “a struggle over those modes of state and corporate sovereignty that control the means of life and death” (p.188). The structure of *Youth in a Suspect Society* means that the core content about youth is bookended by sections that provide political, economic, historical, and theoretical context, which makes for a compelling and grounded though wide-ranging text.

The second chapter, ‘Locked Up: Education and the Youth Crime Complex’ may be of particular interest to readers of the *JPP*. In the preceding chapter, Giroux discusses the role of neoliberal market sovereignty in the construction of youth as depoliticized individualized consumers. If consumption is on one side of the neoliberal coin, waste is on the other, and the second chapter explores the management of youth deemed to constitute disposable populations. This management is accomplished through a growing “youth control complex”² that links institutions sharing a vision of youth as eternally suspicious and potentially threatening. Giroux argues that “[w]hile all youth are now suspect, poor minority youth have become especially targeted by modes of social regulation, crime control, and disposability that have become the major prisms that now define many of the public institutions and spheres that govern their lives” (p.78). The prison is a central institution in this regard, as long-term incapacitation and exclusion has become the preferred ‘solution’ for all manner of social problems. Drawing on the works of Angela Davis, Jonathan Simon, Loïc Wacquant, and a number of others, Giroux discusses mass incarceration as a phenomenon that has been driven by the imprisonment of young people of colour. He describes ongoing efforts to have youth treated as adults by a criminal justice system that is increasingly unwilling to extend any special consideration to juveniles, and the growth of the specialized youth incarceration sector. He also discusses the increasing adoption of carceral techniques and modalities by public schools concerned with governing youth through crime. The convergence of the school and the prison takes a variety of forms, including the adoption of ‘zero tolerance’ policies, lowered

thresholds for suspension and expulsion, and the incorporation of fences, cameras, security checkpoints, and armed guards into the scholastic setting. While Giroux is by no means the first author to engage with the prizonization of schools and the criminalization of youth, his treatment of these topics here is compelling, accessible, and enhanced by its situation within a broader discussion of neoliberalism and racialized biopolitics.

Youth in a Suspect Society builds upon and extends a line of inquiry that Giroux has been developing in a series of recent books. Readers familiar with these texts will recognize in *Youth in a Suspect Society* the central themes of Giroux' social and cultural theory: neoliberalism as a political, cultural, and economic system and form of public pedagogy that exacerbates structural inequalities and preaches a market fundamentalism while eroding the democratic public sphere (see Giroux 2004); the advance of the neo-authoritarian (in)security state and the militarization of everyday life (Giroux 2005; Giroux 2007); the political mobilization of spectacles of terror, fear, and violence (Giroux 2006a); the racialized biopolitics of disposability in the 21st Century (see Giroux 2006b); and a sustained focus on youth, public education, and critical thought.

One of the highlights of this text is the balance it strikes between being an analysis and blistering critique of the plight of American youth under late modern conditions on the one hand, and a call to arms grounded in a deep commitment to the democratic and emancipatory potential of critical and sustained public education and engagement on the other. The data could easily support a more dystopian tone, but Giroux is careful to focus on possibilities for resistance, substantive citizenship, and push-back. In the future, it would be interesting to read a revised edition of *Youth in a Suspect Society* that broadens the focus beyond the USA to look at geographic and cultural variances in the treatment of youth as bodies defined by commodification or disposability. His current conceptual and theoretical influences would lend themselves well to such a study. In the meantime, though, he offers other researchers, educators, activists and citizens much food for thought, and I look forward to seeing how some of his ideas – particularly the notion of the 'suspect society', his treatment of the youth crime complex, and the call for the development of a biopolitics in the interest of global democracy – are taken up.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In brief, understood as the politics of life itself, concerned with “ordering, regulating, and producing life” (p.169), of controlling bodies and populations, and, at the most negative end of the spectrum, of disallowing life to the point of death.
- ² This concept emerges from the work of Victor Rios, who describes it as “an ecology of interlinked institutional arrangements that manages and controls the everyday lives of inner-city youth of color” (p.3).

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Mike Larsen is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at York University, and a Researcher at the York Centre for International and Security Studies. He is Co-managing Editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. His work deals with the politics of secrecy and suspicion, with a focus on Canada’s security certificate regime and its mechanisms and institutions of detention and control. His most recent article (with Justin Piché) is “Exceptional State, Pragmatic Bureaucracy, and Indefinite Detention: The Case of the Kingston Immigration Holding Centre”, published in Volume 24(2) of the *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* (2009). Mike can be reached at mlarsen@yorku.ca.