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An Interview with Henry Giroux

Henry Giroux is an internationally renowned public intellectual and cultural critic. He is the McMaster University Professor for Scholarship in the Public Interest and the Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy at McMaster University. He is the author/editor of more than fifty books, most recently *America at War with Itself* (2016), *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine* (2014), and *America at War With Itself* (2016). He was named in 2012 as one of the "12 Canadians Changing the Way We Think" (https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/01/08/12_canadians_changing_the_way_we_think.html)

Victor Taylor: Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview. This special issue of the *JCRT* focuses on "civic arts and humanities" as a space for artistic expression and social and political change. I would like to begin by describing a tension that informs this special issue, a tension in neoliberal higher education between "civic engagement" and "community engagement." We understand "civic engagement" to mean a *critical* encounter with the political/economic/ideological space involving students, faculty, the institution, and the people of a social environment, and not necessarily "the community" since that too often is narrowly defined by or to the exclusion of race, class, gender, and sexual identities. "Community engagement" in higher education, however, privileges forms of student volunteerism or, when involving the arts and humanities, institutionally sponsored beautification projects. Furthermore, "civic engagement" sees students as critical agents and "community engagement" sees students as free labor or "discretionary spenders." How do you view the tension between the two forms of "engagement," especially as institutions of higher learning more and more play a key role in gentrification?

Henry Giroux: Civic engagement is a much more radical and emancipatory category since it provides the foundation not only for understanding community as part of a broader political project, but also because it refuses to separate matters of race, poverty, class, power, and other social categories from addressing the genesis and nature of the problems that have to be addressed and confronted when engaging in community work. In this context, matters of agency cannot be separated from ethical and political considerations and as such make civic education central to understanding the very nature of politics and the historical context and genesis through which communities are engaged. I think that civic

engagement entails a strong understanding of what might be called civic literacy and civic courage. That is, any community and the work that goes on there must be addressed through categories such as social and economic justice, inequities in relations of power, and the common good. The civic in engagement works to subordinate aesthetic, empirical, and formalistic categories to more substantive political and ethical considerations such as whose interests are benefited by interventions in the community, and how might people living in the community be empowered so as to take control over their lives and the commanding institutions that bear down on them? How does such work benefit the common good, and extend the personal and social rights of all members of the community. Civic engagement is built on the recognition that the United States has a long history rooted in a deep-seated contradiction between democratic values and the narrow, individualistic values that drive market fundamentalism. The precepts of market fundamentalism are central to not only exploiting communities for their resources but also waging a way on them as part of a larger logic of either disposability or privatizing and denigrating people who live in communities that are under siege by the often savage forces of the market and state terrorism. In this sense, civic engagement is the antidote to a notion of volunteerism that extends the privatizing and individualistic values of capitalism. Volunteerism is usually about creating experiences that change the attitudes of the people who live in particular communities, often through the discourse of self-help. In contrast, civic engagement is about working collectively with others not only to transform consciousness but also to change the material conditions of oppression.

While there may be some benefits to volunteerism such as exposing students to a reality that is often invisible to them and providing them with a space for connecting with the alleged "other" and the invisible registers of human suffering, it is too often couched in a discourse of individual interests and functions often as part of a discourse of charitable tourism. In this vocabulary, the notion of care and compassion is limited to the discourse of individual assistance and a narrow if not a colonial notion of privilege and service. Hence, it has a depoliticizing function that addresses social problems by stripping them of history, power, politics, and struggle. Too often volunteerism functions as a therapeutic discourse fixated on positive thinking, narrating the lifestyles of the poor, focusing on the immediacy of the environment, and limiting itself to the vocabulary of resilience, self-transformation, and self-help. Voluntarism is a world-view that focuses on enriching experience not on building solidarities and mobilizing collective modes of resistance. In this instance, it ignores the relationship between private troubles and larger systemic issues, which would demand a more totalizing framework, one that recognizes the need for building social movements and collective forms of action in order to address the problems it often confronts in underserved communities. Moreover, the privilege built into voluntarism often results not in real community dialogue, but in a performance in which the outsider simply narrates his or her own experience, much as a tourist would in a strange land.

Victor Taylor: Continuing with the tension between "civic" and "community" engagement, in *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, you describe a de-sensitizing effect "economic fundamentalism" has on a person's sense of "social solidarity" and "social responsibility," if so-called "community engagement" grows in its significance in college/university curricular requirements won't this further solidify the "college student's" place as person dedicated to or aspiring to living the good life "promised by capitalism" and disconnected from the social sphere?

Henry Giroux: Traveling to communities in order to get a different experience (becoming familiar with the native other) or developing an experience that looks good on one's vita has little to do with any emancipatory notion of community engagement. On the contrary, it mimics the worse dimensions of neoliberal values in which the only values that matter are corporate driven exchange values, while furthering relationships in which one has something to gain often at the expense of others. This is not an ideology that demands compassion, empathy, the ability to understand the experience of others, or to suspend one's solidified common sense assumptions in order to learn from others. Without going too far, I think that voluntarism is trapped in a colonial and neoliberal legacy and set of values that is mostly indifferent to the kind of self-reflection and interrogation about one's own values that might reveal its underlying ideology. I think that volunteerism and the sense of self-righteousness and entitlement it often mimics makes it difficult for its participants to recognize that it has a long history marked by relations between privileged groups and communities that are deeply indebted to a legacy of colonialism. Such a legacy when made visible might prove too daunting and unconformable for many people engaged in volunteerism to become more self-reflective about the ideas, values, and social relations in which they are participating under the rubric of volunteerism. On the other hand, civic engagement points to immersing oneself in the thick mesh of social responsibility and mutual obligations. Its starting point is justice and social responsibility rather than the warm and comforting embrace of helping the other through handouts or the singular acts of individual help. Only then, can engagement be true to what it means to connect civic actions with the discourses of justice, freedom, and equality.

Victor Taylor: In *Neoliberalim's War on Higher Education* you also discuss "sports culture", its connection to big donors, corporations, influential alumni. Would you consider "community engagement," as we defined it, part of that "play book"? Another venue to recruit students away from their sense of social responsibility? That is, a social responsibility that is more than collecting spare change to fight cancer or address some other cause, as worthy as it may be?

Henry Giroux: In this case, I think that professional sports and in some cases big money sports on college campuses undermine rather than promote any viable level of community or community engagement. I think that whatever cultural events they promote in outreaching and integrating community largely serve to divert attention from the commercial, violent, and often misogynistic values that

professional and big sports cultures embody. The market-driven spectacle of entertainment is their forte and everything else is a side show. For instance, my decade long experience at Penn State made clear that football culture had little interest in community engagement accept to make it a legitimating force for the spectacle and the notion that the most viable notion of community was largely organized around the task of winning and legitimating a masculine culture while narrowing the parameters of how a community defined itself. This notion of community represented both a flight from any serious sense of social responsibility and the undermining of any sense of real civic engagement. Today, this is quite visible when the mainstream media focuses on individual football, baseball, and other major sports figures sponsoring a particular charity. This diverts attention from the violence often associated with the games, the vandalism that often takes place after the games, the endless narratives of sports figures abusing women, and the most damaging values that are central to how such teams define themselves and the spectacle of entertainment in which they engage. Sports culture—at least the most corporate driven and commercialized versions—can only define community in highly neoliberal terms: the focus on hyper competitiveness, hyper-masculinity, the individualized star system, excessive salaries that mirror those of major CEOs in big corporations, and an investment in celebrity culture that is as anti-intellectual as it is commodified. Mainstream sports culture has a poor understanding of civic culture, and its notion of adulthood and agency strikes me as both infantilizing and depoliticizing. Sports culture represents the celebration of untrammeled individual success and is firmly ensconced in unfettered market values. It is largely a money machine that limits an understanding of civic life, agency, and empowering currencies of solidarity.

At the heart of the concern over civic engagement versus community engagement is a political and ethical struggle over notions of the public good, critical agency, civic literacy, respect for the other, and those institutions that provide the formative culture that embrace the mutual obligations and values central to a democracy. Americans have entered a historical moment in which community is stripped of its emancipatory possibilities, defined as simply a repository for increasing profits and accumulating capital. Private space now functions to corrode public space and self-interest overrides and notion of the common good. Corroding orbits of privatization and commodification define how we organize our schools, health care system, and other public goods. This speaks to the rise of anti-democratic forces in which civic engagement is both derided and viewed as hostile to the functioning of a social order wedded to shark-like modes of competition and interaction. Communities are not networks nor are they spectacular sites of consumption. Whereas civic engagement is never far from the discourse of justice and what it means to comprehend what we have in common with others, civic engagement is the stuff of long-term visions. Community engagement strikes me as short-lived, ephemeral, and largely a short-term investment. Disrespecting others, which has been highlighted by President Elect, Donald Trump, no less, has become the measure of the degree to which we have been falling away from civic engagement. We need a new conversation about civic engagement, and its value as a fundamental element for sustaining a strong

democracy. We need a conversation in which education becomes central to creating the desires, values, and identities necessary for people to become engaged citizens, capable of civic courage, and willing to fight for a future in notions of collective impoverishment are both resisted and overcome.

Victor Taylor: A few years ago a colleague and I were talking about sponsoring a "student manifesto project" in which students would declare their educational expectations, especially in the context of community engagement. I think students see the limits of "drop in" volunteerism or how they are often used as participants in economic development schemes. From your experience at different colleges and universities, how would you gauge students' readiness/willingness to "go manifesto" on this topic, to express their critical agency?

Henry Giroux: I think students today are acutely aware of the problems society faces but have few outlets on how to address them, especially within the context of a university that has become increasingly corporatized and hostile to issues not governed by an instrumental logic. Many students feel isolated and evidence for this is visible in the rising statistics regarding an increase among students in mental health issues. This suggests to me that many of them are cut off from meaningful communities that give them a sense of commitment, purpose, and offer an opportunity for them to expand their involvement in addressing important social issues. There are few public spaces left where students can be inspired and energized to reach out and capitalize on their talents with others to make the world a better place. Surely, the university in general no longer fills that role. Hence, many of them are straddled with meaningless courses, faculty who are indifferent to social issues, and consequently are cynical about both politics and their future. There is a deep-seated need and challenge to offer them social spaces that offer some relevance to their lives and connect them to larger issues. My sense is that the manifesto would be an initial step in making their lives more meaningful, critical, and transformative.

Victor Taylor: Thank you, Henry.

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