



## Book Review

### American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism

Giroux, Henri. (2018). City Lights Publishers. ISBN 9780872867796 (paper) US\$17.95; 384 pages.

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Henry Giroux's scholarly polemic *American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism* is the sequel to his book about the recent history of poverty and populism in the USA, *America at War with Itself* (2018). Both were published in 2018, which might make them more companion pieces than sequential, but *America at War with Itself* both sets the socioeconomic stage that describes the moment in *Nightmare*, and explains the purpose of both books, rooted in Giroux's ongoing contributions to critical pedagogy. In *War*, he writes:

America is at war with itself, and pedagogy has an essential role to play in fighting back creatively and non-violently. The challenges we face are immense, and the civil rights, resources, community spaces, and political processes required to struggle are under direct and relentless assault. The very notions of the public and the special are being reconstructed under circumstances... which help consolidate authoritarian modes of governance, a warfare state, and a predatory economy by and for the interests of the wealthiest few. (2018, p. 255)

*War* is the recent history of the USA. In it, Giroux traces the history of the elements that mobilized voters in the 2016 presidential election. The USA was divided by geography, gerrymandering, and ecological disaster. In the regions dominated by the Republican Party, the themes of 2016 seamlessly joined the security state. *War* examines the consolidation of GOP power in the ideologies of voters.

For that reason, *Nightmare* seems more like a sequel than a parallel text. It is hastily written in the present tense, disorganized, and making appeals for

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future research and postsecondary teaching goals. The pedagogy is subtle, though. If a reader is not familiar with the rigours of critical pedagogy and its forms of community engagement, then *Nightmare* seems like a scatterbrained plea for rights mobilization and a surge in activism that protects the social safety net. These are important and consequential choices for political actions that are being considered by the entire critical pedagogy community, which in its North American and European niches is currently facing a stark choice between life in the shrinking underfunded academic institution, or a plunge into movement-based community organizing.

Nevertheless, *Nightmare* is still a follow-up to *War*. *War* describes how America arrived at its present state, and *Nightmare* is about the American mid-Trump Administration present in which it is written and published. We should look at *Nightmare* as an example of what happens to academic writing in a moment of profound and irreversible social change. Giroux writes about an apocalyptic moment, from the point of view of someone undergoing the psychological speed stresses of rapid totalizing social change.

*America at War with Itself* stands out in Giroux's corpus as his most unorthodox book. The prose is repetitive, disorganized. His argument switches between descriptions of the current situation, to appeals for future actions, peppered with polemics. Giroux's cogent synthesis of journalism is inflected with adjectives that belie societal stress. His (albeit sound) claims about fascism developing in the Alt Right contexts of Donald Trump's post-truth digital media are distracted by insertions about misery, violent alienation, and other genuine reasons for moral panic. This is a book written by an elder scholar-statesman who has no time to edit and whose publisher is under an unusually morally infused pressure to publish right away.

All of which is to say, there are better books about the history of the Alt Right. It is as though Giroux felt unable to write in his usual cogent style of self-reflection and analysis. The reason that *American Nightmare* is necessary for professors and graduate students to read is to understand the rhetoric of academic writing during ongoing apocalyptic crises.

One of the components of the current authoritarian movement is to rapidly change direction. Leaders contradict themselves in the same answer to a question. They legislate by press release, instead of by legal instrument. Personnel are appointed and fired so quickly that their incumbency is measured in a new unit of time, Scaramuccis.

As a result, we who are in academia are suffering. We must read peer reviewed, trustworthy secondary sources that synthesize primary sources. On the other hand, we have no time to edit, redact, plan surveys of literature, and post preprints for comment. Whatever it is that separates academic conferences from open mic polemics, it is not very helpful to us now.

When the next semester comes, we will want to know what to have on our syllabi for contemporary North American politics. *American Nightmare* belongs on the syllabus as an expression of academic stress and ethical necessity. *American Nightmare* is premised on the idea that our scholarly

question is not *if* America is at war with itself, but *what* does that war look like and how can its damage be mitigated. Academics must ask, if Giroux is correct, then is this the voice in which we must do our work? Is *Nightmare* an example of the only style that our resistance writing can take: doomscrolling infovore scholarship parked in front of the internet since the day Donald Trump rode a down-escalator to the Presidency? And if so, is scholarship only possible as gestalt logic? Does Giroux only make sense as a mirror of how the reader feels? Is that reliable scholarship during a crisis? Is there a reliable scholarly voice during our ongoing crisis?

Giroux's style is shaped by Trumpism's totalized present tense, as are our own stressed minds. Should scholars internalize the new forms of totalitarianism that exert "paralyzing impact on society" (p. 140); that is, a social and technological pressure to "privatize communication by shifting the site where information is produced... [writing for] the immediate present [instead of referring to] the future, as the time of the political" (p. 141)?

Chapter One is an insightful description of how George Orwell's writing (emphasis on *1984*), and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* contain lessons for effective resistance to Trump's government and the post-truth media. Furthermore, Giroux argues that the two novels will probably inspire incompatible approaches to opposition. While they are valid depictions of the reality we are now experiencing, we will have to choose one or the other to shape our mode of resistance. Giroux concludes,

Orwell believed in the power of people to resist the seduction of authoritarian propaganda with spirited forms of broad-based resistance willing to grasp the reins of political emancipation. For Huxley, there was only hope to be found in pessimism that had exhausted itself, leaving people to reflect on the implications of a totalitarian power that controls pleasure as well as pain, and the utterly disintegrated social fabric that would be its consequence. (p. 107)

Giroux himself takes the side of Orwell's optimism, but not at the expense of dismissing Huxley's equally probable prophecy. He encourages anti-fascist scholars not to question, "Am I with Orwell or with Huxley?" but rather to ask: "Are the people around me with Orwell or with Huxley?" (p. 107). So, there is in Giroux's first chapter, an essay that sets up a syllabus in which we read *1984* and *Brave New World*. The challenge for us is to follow-up by analyzing our local communities and deciding which novel most helps our local resistance.

Chapter Two, "Authoritarianism and the Legacy of Fascist Collaboration," deals with the question of whether Donald Trump's command over the American government and society ought to be named as "fascist" using a pattern from the past, despite an uneven fit. Giroux's answer is that he believes scholars risk "overplaying" the differences between Trump and fascism of the past. The problem is not whether Trump is a neo-Nazi. The problem is that his administration facilitates neo-Nazi legal theory and

realizes their fascist, regionalized, antagonizing political agendas. Giroux takes a rhetorical position, in that one of the strengths of the Alt Right's political rhetoric is to manifest endless differences without distinctions, which delays reasoned opposition. Giroux instructs us to pay attention to the similarities because it is the similarities that advance Trump's agenda. Giroux knows fascism not by its historically parallel components, but instead by its parallel social impacts (p. 140).

Giroux proposes an equally capacious room for broad resistance. He proposes that the resistance is about social impacts, by bringing together "various isolated movements to struggle for a democracy appropriate for the twenty-first century, based on participatory democracy and a massive redistribution of wealth and power" (p. 135). Ideological agreement is unproductive wherever pragmatism can justify the means to resist. Theoretical rigour runs up against the pragmatic challenges of oppositional research. Explaining the difficulty that extends beyond activism and into academic discourse that is both rigorous and oppositional, both obligated to tenure and accountable to private research funding, Giroux states, "we cannot let anger and resentment distort our organizing and political work. It is time to... repudiate the notion that the interests of corporations and those of citizens are... the same" (p. 135). A statement that is simple on its face but has time-sensitive considerations for methodology and peer review.

In Chapter Three, titled "Beyond the Politics of Incivility" (pp. 137-156), Giroux examines rapidly accelerating political and corporate processes that isolated Americans from each other in 2018. According to Giroux, the 21<sup>st</sup> century form of American fascism has a "paralyzing effect on society" (p. 140), the paralysis of which is neither hyperbole nor metaphor, but a design feature of neoliberal policies that strategically create social isolation wherever there used to be personal agency to reach out to government support services and interpersonal support (p. 141). Giroux, citing Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, argues Donald Trump's election campaign was successful not necessarily because of social media's enabling of fake news, but because digital media "privatizes communication by shifting the site where information is produced... in the immediate present" (p. 141), therefore politics happen in the *now* instead of being planned for in the *future*. Digital political life is not premised on our experiences *now* that inform our *future* interactions with the state, the media, and people. Politics is reduced to instantaneous reactionary responses. Giroux cites Guy Debord's image of social media as a "perpetual motion machine of fear" (p. 146), as a neoliberal form of governing isolated people, combined with Tom Englehart's analysis that "the national security state [has become] a fourth branch of [American] government" (p. 147), which made it available to Trump to tweet himself into control with rapid fascist rhetoric. Therefore, Trump was co-opting a system of policy messaging that already reduced politics to "the realm of the personal and affective" while "cancelling out [discourse about] the underlying condition that might produce anger, or

misguided resentment, or a passion grounded in the capacity to reason” (pp. 147-148).

Giroux confronts educators and researchers with the problem that, isolated, Americans are streamed into the “politics of unchecked personal resentment” while anti-fascist power is “legitimate politics of indignation rooted in solidarity” (p. 148). Solidarity, in 2018, seemed to Giroux no longer existent in a practical way that could make use of trained critical thinking, nor generate social justice activism from experience. Isolated, “critical reflection no longer challenges [Trump’s bigoted] appeal to ‘common sense’ or casts light on the shadows of racism, hatred, and bigotry” (p. 149). Giroux points out that at a moment when a federal government is fascist, citizens can use “incivility as righteous anger [to engender] emotional connection” instead of isolation, “a renewed sense of community, compassion and collective resistance” (p. 156).

Therefore, Chapter Three offers a theoretical framework with which to study the emergence of the American failed pandemic responses, their synergy with American Neo-Fascism, as well as empirical questions about the solidarity seen in Black Lives Matter protests, the new abolitionism, and public challenges to police violence, jury trials, and the 2020 electoral map. In writing Chapter Three as a stand-alone essay Giroux was prescient, informed, or lucky in his analysis; whichever way he succeeded in his critical claims, the style of *American Nightmare* indicates he had access to appropriate methodology for researching rapid, chauvinistic social change operating as part of an attempted coup of the USA. But post-pandemic, the most important question of all might be whether we North Americans are returning to social life or returning to the most isolated society we have ever known.

In Chapter Four, Giroux concludes, “incivility as righteous anger can fuel an emotional connection not to hatred and bigotry, but to a renewed sense of community, compassion and collective resistance” (p. 156). The American public has been intellectually and ideologically primed for Trump’s policies by 20 years of arguments for neoliberal government, and decades of popular culture that glorifies the predatory power of individualism over the welfare of the many. The resolution that Giroux proposes is that resistance entails interrogating the corporate cruelty critically. Academics must develop “a political and moral lens for thinking through the present convergence of power, politics, and everyday life. ...Unveiling the way in which a nation demoralizes itself [and] highlights... structures of domination” (pp. 165-166). Giroux wants to oppose the “politics of unchecked resentment” with a “legitimate politics of indignation rooted in solidarity” (p. 148).

The topic of the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters concentrate on the victorious white supremacist movement and the resurgence of the international neo-Nazi movement. In those chapters Giroux offers secondary source confirmation of other research rather than original interpretations. In these chapters, as elsewhere, Giroux does not explicitly say that empirical

research approaches are required, but often he makes moral declarations that would imply empirically guided solutions. Trump's politics of incivility create an atmosphere where "critical reflection no longer challenges a poisonous appeal to 'common sense' or casts light on the shadows of racism, hatred, and bigotry" (p. 149). What, then, can generate solidarity when social networks have already been undone by a state of social isolation? What can inform access to justice, when the rule of law is explicitly deemed inconsequential by the government?

This focus on empirically guided solutions is thread throughout the book. Giroux spatters his pages with occasional ranting lists of empirically verifiable predictions. In the first chapter he predicts that, "a culture of civic illiteracy will likely become more widespread and legitimated, along with a culture of fear that will enable an increasingly harsh law-and-order regime" (p. 103), a project for empirical political science and sociolegal research. In the second chapter, he says "it is against the historical backdrop of collaboration that Trump's association with various dictators should be analyzed" (p. 126), a project that might drive academic priorities. Also, in the third chapter, there is a description of the breakdown of society and access to justice, a description that is well within the bounds of critical empirical research:

The not-so-subtle signs of the seething culture of resentment are everywhere... Young children, especially those whose parents are being targeted by Trump's rhetoric, are being bullied more. State-sanctioned violence is accelerating against Native Americans, Black youth, Latinos, and others now deemed inferior... hate crimes are on the rise, seeping into public spaces and institutions once largely protected from such assaults. (p. 151)

For how long are the predictions offered in *American Nightmare* going to be relevant? The answer is unclear. Some readers will take on Giroux's most tumultuous book as a genre milestone for a catastrophic writing style during a genuine global moral panic. Be careful, though, not to overplay the artistic looseness of a brainstorm in a post-truth panic.

## References

Giroux, H. (2018). *America at War with Itself*. City Lights Publishers.