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The Opinion Pages

The Violence of Forgetting

Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux

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This is the fifth in a series of dialogues with philosophers and critical theorists on violence. This conversation is with Henry A. Giroux, a professor in the department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. His latest book is "America at War With Itself" (City Lights).

Brad Evans: Throughout your work you have dealt with the dangers of ignorance and what you have called the violence of "organized forgetting." Can you explain what you mean by this and why we need to be attentive to intellectual forms of violence?

Henry Giroux: Unfortunately, we live at a moment in which ignorance appears to be one of the defining features of American political and cultural life. Ignorance has become a form of weaponized refusal to acknowledge the violence of the past, and revels in a culture of media spectacles in which public concerns are translated into private obsessions, consumerism and fatuous entertainment. As James Baldwin rightly warned, "Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

The warning signs from history are all too clear. Failure to learn from the past has disastrous political consequences. Such ignorance is not simply about the absence of information. It has its own political and pedagogical categories whose formative cultures threaten both critical agency and democracy itself.

What I have called the violence of organized forgetting signals how contemporary politics are those in which emotion triumphs over reason, and spectacle over truth, thereby erasing history by producing an endless flow of fragmented and disingenuous knowledge. At a time in which figures like Donald Trump are able to gain a platform by promoting values of "greatness" that serve to cleanse the memory of social and political progress achieved in the name of equality and basic human decency, history and thought itself are under attack.

Once ignorance is weaponized, violence seems to be a tragic inevitability. The mass shooting in Orlando is yet another example of an emerging global political and cultural climate of violence fed by hate and mass hysteria. Such violence legitimates not only a kind of inflammatory rhetoric and ideological fundamentalism that views violence as the only solution to addressing social issues, it also provokes further irrational acts of violence against others. Spurrned on by a complete disrespect for those who affirm different ways of living, this massacre points to a growing climate of hate and bigotry that is unapologetic in its political nihilism.

It would be easy to dismiss such an act as another senseless example of radical Islamic terrorism. That is too easy. Another set of questions needs to be asked. What are the deeper political, educational, and social conditions that allow a climate of hate, racism, and bigotry to become the dominant discourse of a society or worldview? What role do politicians with their racist and aggressive discourses play in the emerging landscapes violence? How can we use education, among other resources, to prevent politics from being transformed into a pathology? And how might we counter these tragic and terrifying conditions without retreating into security or military mindsets?

B.E.: You insist that education is crucial to any viable critique of oppression and violence. Why?

H.G.: I begin with the assumption that education is fundamental to democracy. No democratic society can survive without a formative culture, which includes but is not limited to schools capable of producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially inclusive and responsible way. This is contrary to forms of education that reduce learning to an instrumental logic that too often and too easily can be perverted to violent ends.

So we need to remember that education can be both a basis for critical thought and a site for repression, which destroys thinking and leads to violence. Michel Foucault wrote that knowledge and truth not only "belong to the register of order and peace," but can also be found on the "side of violence, disorder, and war." What matters is the type of education a person is encouraged to pursue.

It's not just schools that are a site of this struggle. "Education" in this regard not only includes public and higher education, but also a range of cultural apparatuses and media that produce, distribute and legitimate specific forms of knowledge, ideas, values and social relations. Just think of the ways in which politics and violence now inform each other and dominate media culture. First-person shooter video games top the video-game market while Hollywood films ratchet up representations of extreme violence and reinforce a culture of fear, aggression and militarization. Similar spectacles now drive powerful media conglomerates like 21st Century Fox, which includes both news and entertainment subsidiaries.

As public values wither along with the public spheres that produce them, repressive modes of education gain popularity and it becomes easier to incarcerate people than to educate them, to model schools after prisons, to reduce the obligations of citizenship to mere consumption and to remove any notion of social responsibility from society's moral registers and ethical commitments.

B.E.: Considering Hannah Arendt's warning that the forces of domination and exploitation require "thoughtlessness" on behalf of the oppressors, how is the capacity to think freely and in an informed way key to providing a counter to violent practices?

H.G.: Young people can learn to challenge violence, like those in the antiwar movement of the early '70s or today in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Education does more than create critically minded, socially responsible citizens. It enables young people and others to challenge authority by connecting individual troubles to wider systemic concerns. This notion of education is especially important given that racialized violence, violence against women and the ongoing assaults on public goods cannot be solved on an individual basis.

Violence maims not only the body but also the mind and spirit. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, it lies "on the side of belief and persuasion." If we are to counter violence by offering young people ways to think differently about their world and the choices before them, they must be empowered to recognize themselves in any analysis of violence, and in doing so to acknowledge that it speaks to their lives meaningfully.

There is no genuine democracy without an informed public. While there are no guarantees that a critical education will prompt individuals to contest various forms of oppression and violence, it is clear that in the absence of a formative democratic culture, critical thinking will increasingly be trumped by anti-intellectualism, and walls and war will become the only means to resolve global challenges.

Creating such a culture of education, however, will not be easy in a society that links the purpose of education with being competitive in a global economy.

B.E.: Mindful of this, there is now a common policy in place throughout the education system to create "safe spaces" so students feel comfortable in their environments. This is often done in the name of protecting those who may have their voices denied. But given your claim about the need to confront injustice, does this represent an ethically responsible approach to difficult subject matters?

H.G.: There is a growing culture of conformity and quietism on university campuses, made evident in the current call for safe spaces and trigger warnings. This is not just conservative reactionism, but is often carried out by liberals who believe they are acting with the best intentions. Violence comes in many forms and can be particularly disturbing when confronted in an educational setting if handled dismissively or in ways that blame victims.

Yet troubling knowledge cannot be condemned on the basis of making students uncomfortable, especially if the desire for safety serves merely to limit access to difficult knowledge and the resources needed to analyze it. Critical education should be viewed as the art of the possible rather than a space organized around timidity, caution and fear.

Creating safe spaces runs counter to the notion that learning should be unsettling, that students should challenge common sense assumptions and be willing to confront disturbing realities despite discomfort. The political scientist Wendy Brown rightly argues that the "domain of free public speech is not one of emotional safety or reassurance," and is " not what the public sphere and political speech promise." A university education should, Brown writes, " call you to think, question, doubt" and " incite you to question everything you assume, think you know or care about."

This is particularly acute when dealing with pedagogies of violence and oppression. While there is a need to be ethically sensitive to the subject matter, our civic responsibility requires, at times, confronting truly intolerable conditions. The desire for emotionally safe spaces can be invoked to protect one's sense of privilege — especially in the privileged sites of university education. This is further compounded by the frequent attempts by students to deny some speakers a platform because their views are controversial. While the intentions may be understandable, this is a dangerous road to go down.

Confronting the intolerable should be challenging and upsetting. Who could read the testimonies of Primo Levi and not feel intellectually and emotionally exhausted? Or Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, not to mention those of Malcolm X? It is the conditions that produce violence that should upset us ethically and prompt us to act responsibly, rather than to capitulate to a privatized emotional response that substitutes a therapeutic language for a political and worldly one.

There is more at work here than the infantilizing notion that students should be protected rather than challenged in the classroom; there is also the danger of creating a chilling effect on the part of faculty who want to address controversial topics such as war, poverty, spectacles of violence, racism, sexism and inequality. If

American society wants to invest in its young people, it has an obligation to provide them with an education in which they are challenged, can learn to take risks, think outside the boundaries of established ideologies, and expand the far reaches of their creativity and critical judgment. This demands a pedagogy that is complicated, taxing and disruptive.

B.E.: You place the university at the center of a democratic and civil society. But considering that the university is not a politically neutral setting separate from power relations, you are concerned with what you term "gated intellectuals" who become seduced by the pursuit of power. Please explain this concept.

H.G.: Public universities across the globe are under attack not because they are failing, but because they are they are considered discretionary — unlike K-12 education for which funding is largely compulsory. The withdrawal of financial support has initiated a number of unsavory responses: Universities have felt compelled to turn towards corporate management models. They have effectively hobbled academic freedom by employing more precarious part-time instead of full-time faculty, and they increasingly treat students as consumers to be seduced by various campus gimmicks while burying the majority in debt.

My critique of what I have called "gated intellectuals" responds to these troubling trends by pointing to an increasingly isolated and privileged full-time faculty who believe that higher education still occupies the rarefied, otherworldly space of disinterested intellectualism of Cardinal Newman's 19th century, and who defend their own indifference to social issues through appeals to professionalism or by condemning as politicized those academics who grapple with larger social issues. Some academics have gone so far as to suggest that criticizing the university is tantamount to destroying it. There is a type of intellectual violence at work here that ignores and often disparages the civic function of education while forgetting Hannah Arendt's incisive admonition that "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it."

Supported by powerful conservative foundations and awash in grants from the defense and intelligence agencies, such gated intellectuals appear to have forgotten that in a democracy it is crucial to defend the university as a crucial democratic

public sphere. This is not to suggest that they are silent. On the contrary, they provide the intellectual armory for war, the analytical supports for gun ownership, and lend legitimacy to a host of other policies that lead to everyday forms of structural violence and poverty. Not only have they succumbed to official power, they collude with it.

B.E.: I feel your recent work provides a somber updating of Arendt's notion of "dark times," hallmarked by political and intellectual catastrophe. How might we harness the power of education to reimagine the future in more inclusive and less violent terms?

H.G.: The current siege on higher education, whether through defunding education, eliminating tenure, tying research to military needs, or imposing business models of efficiency and accountability, poses a dire threat not only to faculty and students who carry the mantle of university self-governance, but also to democracy itself.

The solutions are complex and cannot be addressed in isolation from a range of other issues in the larger society such as the defunding of public goods, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, poverty and the reach of the prison-industrial complex into the lives of those marginalized by class and race.

We have to fight back against a campaign, as Gene R. Nichol puts it, "to end higher education's democratizing influence on the nation." To fight this, faculty, young people and others outside of higher education must collectively engage with larger social movements for the defense of public goods. We must address that as the welfare state is defunded and dismantled, the state turns away from enacting social provisions and becomes more concerned about security than social responsibility. Fear replaces compassion, and a survival-of-the-fittest ethic replaces any sense of shared concern for others.

Lost in the discourse of individual responsibility and self-help are issues like power, class and racism. Intellectuals need to create the public spaces in which identities, desires and values can be encouraged to act in ways conducive to the formation of citizens willing to fight for individual and social rights, along with those ideals that give genuine meaning to a representative democracy.

Any discussion of the fate of higher education must address how it is shaped by the current state of inequality in American society, and how it perpetuates it. Not only is such inequality evident in soaring tuition costs, inevitably resulting in the growing exclusion of working- and middle-class students from higher education, but also in the transformation of over two-thirds of faculty positions into a labor force of overworked and powerless adjunct faculty members. Faculty need to take back the university and reclaim modes of governance in which they have the power to teach and act with dignity, while denouncing and dismantling the increasing corporatization of the university and the seizing of power by administrators and their staff, who now outnumber faculty on most campuses.

In return, academics need to fight for the right of students to be given an education not dominated by corporate values. Higher education is a right, and not an entitlement. It should be free, as it is in many other countries, and as Robin Kelley points out, this should be true particularly for minority students. This is all the more crucial as young people have been left out of the discourse of democracy. Rather than invest in prisons and weapons of death, Americans need a society that invests in public and higher education.

There is more at stake here than making visible the vast inequities in educational and economic opportunities. Seeing education as a political form of intervention, offering a path toward racial and economic justice, is crucial in reimagining a new politics of hope. Universities should be subversive in a healthy society. They should push against the grain, and give voice to the voiceless the powerless and the whispers of truth that haunt the apostles of unchecked power and wealth. Pedagogy should be disruptive and unsettling, while pushing hard against established orthodoxies. Such demands are far from radical, and leave more to be done, but they point to a new beginning in the struggle over the role of higher education in the United States.

Brad Evans, a senior lecturer in international relations at the University of Bristol in England, is the founder and director of the Histories of Violence project (@histofviolence), dedicated to critiquing the problem of violence in the 21st century. His most recent books include "Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle," with Henry A. Giroux, and "Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously," with Julian Reid.

Now in print: "The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments," an anthology of essays from The Times's philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

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