

Protesting Youth in an Age of Neoliberal Savagery

Written by Henry A. Giroux

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/20/protesting-youth-in-an-age-of-neoliberal-savagery/>

HENRY A. GIROUX, MAY 20 2014

Neoliberalism's Assault on Democracy

Fred Jameson has argued that "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." He goes on to say that "We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (Jameson 2003). One way of understanding Jameson's comment is that within the ideological and affective spaces in which the neoliberal subject is produced and market-driven ideologies are normalized, there are new waves of resistance, especially among young people, who are insisting that casino capitalism is driven by a kind of mad violence and form of self-sabotage, and that if it does not come to an end, what we will experience, in all probability, is the destruction of human life and the planet itself. Certainly, more recent scientific reports on the threat of ecological disaster from researchers at the University of Washington, NASA, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reinforce this dystopian possibility. [1]

As the latest stage of predatory capitalism, neoliberalism is part of a broader economic and political project of restoring class power and consolidating the rapid concentration of capital, particularly financial capital (Giroux 2008; 2014). As a political project, it includes "the deregulation of finance, privatization of public services, elimination and curtailment of social welfare programs, open attacks on unions, and routine violations of labor laws" (Yates 2013). As an ideology, it casts all dimensions of life in terms of market rationality, construes profit-making as the arbiter and essence of democracy, consuming as the only operable form of citizenship, and upholds the irrational belief that the market can both solve all problems and serve as a model for structuring all social relations. As a mode of governance, it produces identities, subjects, and ways of life driven by a survival-of-the fittest ethic, grounded in the idea of the free, possessive individual, and committed to the right of ruling groups and institutions to exercise power removed from matters of ethics and social costs. As a policy and political project, it is wedded to the privatization of public services, the dismantling of the connection of private issues and public problems, the selling off of state functions, liberalization of trade in goods and capital investment, the eradication of government regulation of financial institutions and corporations, the destruction of the welfare state and unions, and the endless marketization and commodification of society.

Neoliberalism has put an enormous effort into creating a commanding cultural apparatus and public pedagogy in which individuals can only view themselves as consumers, embrace freedom as the right to participate in the market, and supplant issues of social responsibility for an unchecked embrace of individualism and the belief that all social relation be judged according to how they further one's individual needs and self-interests. Matters of mutual caring, respect, and compassion for the other have given way to the limiting orbits of privatization and unrestrained self-interest, just as it has become increasingly difficult to translate private troubles into larger social, economic, and political considerations. As the democratic public spheres of civil society have atrophied under the onslaught of neoliberal regimes of austerity, the social contract has been either greatly weakened or replaced by savage forms of casino capitalism, a culture of fear, and the increasing use of state violence. One consequence is that it has become more difficult for people to debate and question neoliberal hegemony and the widespread misery it produces for young people, the poor, middle class, workers, and other segments of society — now considered disposable under neoliberal regimes which are governed by a survival-of-the fittest ethos, largely imposed by the ruling economic and political elite. That they are unable to make their voices heard and lack any viable representation in the process makes clear the degree to which young people and others are suffering under a democratic deficit, producing what

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Chantal Mouffe calls “a profound dissatisfaction with a number of existing societies” under the reign of neoliberal capitalism (Mouffe 2013:119). This is one reason why so many youth, along with workers, the unemployed, and students, have been taking to the streets in Greece, Mexico, Egypt, the United States, and England.

The Rise of Disposable Youth

What is particularly distinctive about the current historical conjuncture is the way in which young people, particularly low-income and poor minority youth across the globe, have been increasingly denied any place in an already weakened social order and the degree to which they are no longer seen as central to how a number of countries across the globe define their future. The plight of youth as disposable populations is evident in the fact that millions of them in countries such as England, Greece, and the United States have been unemployed and denied long term benefits. The unemployment rate for young people in many countries such as Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece hovers between 40 and 50 per cent. To make matters worse, those with college degrees either cannot find work or are working at low-skill jobs that pay paltry wages. In the United States, young adjunct faculty constitute one of the fastest growing populations on food stamps. Suffering under huge debts, a jobs crisis, state violence, a growing surveillance state, and the prospect that they would inherit a standard of living far below that enjoyed by their parents, many young people have exhibited a rage that seems to deepen their resignation, despair, and withdrawal from the political arena.

This is the first generation, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues, in which the “plight of the outcast may stretch to embrace a whole generation.” (Bauman 2012a; 2012b; 2012c) He rightly insists that today’s youth have been “cast in a condition of liminal drift, with no way of knowing whether it is transitory or permanent” (Bauman 2004:76). Youth no longer occupy the hope of a privileged place that was offered to previous generations. They now inhabit a neoliberal notion of temporality marked by a loss of faith in progress along with the emergence of apocalyptic narratives in which the future appears indeterminate, bleak, and insecure. Heightened expectations and progressive visions pale and are smashed next to the normalization of market-driven government policies that wipe out pensions, eliminate quality health care, raise college tuition, and produce a harsh world of joblessness, while giving millions to banks and the military. Students, in particular, found themselves in a world in which unrealized aspirations have been replaced by dashed hopes and a world of onerous debt (Fraser 2013; On the history of debt, see Graeber 2012).

The Revival of the Radical Imagination

Within the various regimes of neoliberalism that have emerged particularly in North since the late 1970s, the ethical grammars that drew attention to the violence and suffering withered or, as in the United States, seemed to disappear altogether, while dispossessed youth continued to lose their dignity, bodies, and material goods to the machineries of disposability. The fear of losing everything, the horror of an engulfing and crippling precarity, the quest to merely survive, the rise of the punishing state and police violence, along with the impending reality of social and civil death, became a way of life for the 99 percent in the United States and other countries. Under such circumstances, youth were no longer the place where society reveals its dreams, but increasingly hid its nightmares. Against the ravaging policies of austerity and disposability, “zones of abandonment appeared in which the domestic machinery of violence, suffering, cruelty, and punishment replaced the values of compassion, social responsibility, and civic courage” (Biehl 2005:2).

In opposition to such conditions, a belief in the power of collective resistance and politics emerged once again in 2010, as global youth protests embraced the possibility of deepening and expanding democracy, rather than rejecting it. Such movements produced a new understanding of politics based on horizontal forms of collaboration and political participation, and in doing so resurrected revitalized and much-needed questions about class power, inequality, financial corruption, and the shredding of the democratic process, as well as what it meant to create new communities of mutual support, democratic modes of exchange and governance, and public spheres in which critical dialogue and exchanges could take place (For an excellent analysis on neoliberal-induced financial corruption, see Anderson 2004).

A wave of youth protests starting in 2010 in Tunisia, and spreading across the globe to the United States and

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Europe, eventually posed a direct challenge to neoliberal modes of domination and the corruption of politics, if not democracy itself (Hardt & Negri 2012). The legitimating, debilitating, and depoliticizing notion that politics could only be challenged within established methods of reform and existing relations of power was rejected outright by students and other young people across the globe. For a couple of years, young people transformed basic assumptions about what politics is and how the radical imagination could be mobilized to challenge the basic beliefs of neoliberalism and other modes of authoritarianism. They also challenged dominant discourses ranging from deficit reduction and taxing the poor, to important issues that included poverty, joblessness, the growing unmanageable levels of student debt, and the massive spread of corporate corruption. As Jonathan Schell argued, youth across the globe were enormously successfully in unleashing “a new spirit of action”, an expression of outrage fueled less by policy demands than by a cry of collective moral and political indignation whose message was

‘Enough!’ to a corrupt political, economic and media establishment that hijacked the world’s wealth for itself... sabotaging the rule of law, waging interminable savage and futile wars, plundering the world’s finite resources, and lying about all this to the public [while] threatening Earth’s life forms into the bargain. (Schell 2011)

Yet, some theorists have recently argued that little has changed since 2011, in spite of this expression of collective rage and accompanying demonstrations by youth groups across the globe.

The Collapse or Reconfiguration of Youthful Protests?

Costas Lapavitsas and Alex Politaki, writing in *The Guardian*, argue that as the “economic and social disaster unfolded in 2012 and 2013”, youth in Greece, France, Portugal, and Spain have largely been absent from “politics, social movements and even from the spontaneous social networks that have dealt with the worst of the catastrophe” (Lapavitsas & Politaki 2014). Yet, at the same time, they insist that more and more young people have been “attracted to nihilistic ends of the political spectrum, including varieties of anarchism and fascism” (Lapavitsas & Politaki 2014). This suggests they have hardly been absent from politics. On the contrary, those youth moving to the right are being mobilized around needs that simply promise the swindle of fulfillment. This does not suggest youth are becoming invisible as much as it implies that the economic crisis has not been matched by a crisis of ideas, one that would propel young people towards left political parties or social formations that effectively articulate a critical understanding of the present economic and political crisis, and a strategy to create and sustain a radical democratic political movement that avoids cooptation of the prevailing economic and political systems of oppression now dominating the United States, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, France, and England, among other countries.

This critique of youthful protesters as a suspect generation is repeated in greater detail by Andrew R. Myers in *Student Pulse* (Myers 2012). He argues that deteriorating economic and educational conditions for youth all over Europe have created not only a profound sense of political pessimism among young people, but also a dangerous, if not cynical, distrust towards established politics. Myers seems less concerned about the conditions that have written young people out of jobs, a decent education, imposed a massive debt on them, and offers up a future of despair and dashed hopes than the alleged unfortunate willingness of young people to turn their back on traditional parties. Myers argues rightly that globalization is the enemy of young people and is undermining democracy, but he wrongly insists that traditional social democratic parties are the only vehicles and hope left for real reform. As such, Myers argues that youth who exhibit distrust towards established governments and call for the construction of another world are a sign of political defeat, if not cynicism itself. Unfortunately, with his lament about how little youth are protesting today and about their lack of engagement in the traditional forms of politics, he endorses, in the end, a defense of those left/liberal parties that embrace social democracy and the new labor policies of centrist-left coalitions. His rebuke borders on bad faith, given his criticism of young people for not engaging in electoral politics and joining with unions, both of which, for many youth, rightfully represent elements of a reformist politics they reject.

It is ironic that both of these critiques of the alleged passivity of youth and the failure of their politics have nothing to say about the generations of adults that failed these young people — that is, what disappears in these narratives is the fact that an older generation accepted the “realization that one generation no longer holds out a hand to the next” (Knott 2011:ix). What is lacking here is any critical sense regarding the historical conditions and dismal lack of political and moral responsibility of an adult generation who shamefully bought into and reproduced, at least since the

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1970s, governments and social orders wedded to war, greed, political corruption, xenophobia, and willing acceptance of the dictates of a ruthless form of neoliberal globalization.

In fact, what was distinctive about the protesting youth across the globe was their rejection to the injustices of neoliberalism and their attempts to redefine the meaning of politics and democracy, while fashioning new forms of revolt (Hardt & Negri 2012; Graeber 2013). Among their many criticism, youthful protesters argued vehemently that traditional social democratic, left, and liberal parties suffered from an “extremism of the center” that had become complicitous with the corporate and ruling political elites, resulting in their embrace of the inequities of a form of casino capitalism which assumed that the market should govern the entirety of social life, not just the economic realm (Hardt & Negri 2012:88).

Resurrecting the Radical Imagination

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that what united the Occupy Movement in the US with other movements globally was their emphasis on direct action and their rejection of modernist structures of representation and politics, including support for elections and traditional political parties, which they considered corrupt. As such, they did not reject the project of democracy, but asked where it had gone and how they could “engage with it again” and win back “the political power of the citizen worker” (Hardt & Negri 2012:29). Commenting on the radical nature of such youth protests, David Graeber argues that the potential of the new youth movements, if not their threat to both conservatives and liberals alike, is that they were more “willing to embrace positions more radical than anything seen, on a mass scale” in a number of countries, particularly “their explicit appeal to class politics, a complete reconstruction of the existing political system, [and] a call (for many at least) not just to reform capitalism but to begin dismantling it entirely” (Graeber 2013:69-70).

What recent critics of the current state of youth protests miss is that the real issue is not whether the occupy movements throughout Europe and the US have petered out, but rather, what have we learned from them, how have they been transformed, and what are we going to do about it? More specifically, what can be done to revitalize these rebellions into an international movement capable of effecting real change? Rather than claiming that youth have failed protesting the politics of austerity, neoliberal economies of stagnation, and the corrupt rule of finance capital, it is more important to recognize the ways in which such actions are undermined by the continued struggle for survival, and the threat and reality of state violence. The great “crime” of the youthful protesters is that they have embraced the utopian notion that there is an alternative to capitalism and, in doing so, are fighting back against a systemic war on the radical imagination, the belief that everything is for consumption, and that the only value that matters is exchange value.

The protesters in various countries have not failed. On the contrary, they realize that they need more time to fully develop the visions, strategies, cultural apparatuses, infrastructures, organizations, and alliances necessary to more fully realize their attempts to replace the older, corrupt social orders with new ones that are not simply democratic, but have the support of the people who inhabit them. Rather than disappearing, many protesters have focused on more specific struggles, such as getting universities to disinvest in coal industries, fighting the rise of student debt, organizing against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, protesting austerity cuts, creating free social services for the poor and excluded, and developing educational spaces that can provide the formative culture necessary for creating the needs, identities, and modes of agency capable of democratic relations (Zeese 2013; Taaffe 2013; Brahinsky 2014). At the same time, they are participating in everyday struggles that, as Thomas Piketty points out in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, make clear that free-market capitalism is not only responsible for “terrifying” inequalities in both wealth and income, but also produces anti-democratic oligarchies (Piketty 2014:571). And it is precisely through various attempts to create spaces in which democratic culture can be cultivated that the radical imagination can be liberated from the machinery of social and political death produced by casino capitalism. What was once considered impossible becomes possible through the development of worldwide youth protests that speak to a future that is being imagined, but waiting to be brought to fruition.

Challenges for Dark Times

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New rights, demands, visions, and modes of political representation dedicated to the public and social good need time and involve long-term commitments to develop. How the construction of alternative forms of power, strategies, and organization will be developed that can both challenge established powers and become more fully realized is not clear. Needless to say, while youth movements around the globe have and are providing what Hardt and Negri call “a scaffolding” in preparation for an unforeseen event that would provide the ground for a radical social break out of which a new society can be built, there is much to be done in preparation for such an event (Hardt & Negri:103). The challenge young protesters face centers on developing visions, tactics, and strong organizations that enable strategies for change that become more than ephemeral protests reduced to “signs without organization”, incapable of making a real difference (Aronowitz 2014).

Youth in various countries need to cultivate a radical imagination capable of providing alternatives to capitalism that will offer a challenge not only to neoliberalism and its destructive austerity policies, but also a vision that speaks to people’s needs for a radical democracy, one that is capable of convincing diverse elements of a broader public that change is possible, and that existing systems of globalization and casino capitalism can be overcome. While the crisis of financial capital, among other dominant modes of oppression, must be challenged, there is also the urgent need for youth protesters to articulate “the broader dimensions of alienation beyond income disparity” (Aronowitz 2011). Issues of existential despair, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and a retreat into the orbits of privatization must be addressed if subjectivities and modes of agency are to be mobilized, capable of engaging in the long struggle for a radical democracy. Moreover, as long as these protest groups are fragmented, no significant change will take place. Planning effective strategies and building sustainable organizations will not work as long as there are divisions around authority, race, gender, class, sexuality, and identity. When these divisions function so as to democratize all demands and fail to provide some of democratic leadership, politics dissolves into a jumble of competing discourses and power becomes pathologized. As Sarah Jaffee points out,

The paradox of Occupy is that many of the things that made it succeed also made it splinter. The attraction to a “leaderless” movement was palpable, and the lack of demands made it possible for anyone to join in as long as they agreed with the basic premise that a tiny elite has too much power. Yet the idea of leaderlessness, as so many have written, masks the ways power continues to operate, and the lack of demands wound up as a refusal, oftentimes, to deal at all with existing systems. (Jaffee 2014)

Alliances among different groups, especially with workers and labor unions, must take place across national boundaries, motivated by a comprehensive understanding of global politics and its mechanics of power, ideology, corporate sovereignty, and its devastating effects on people’s lives, and the reality and ideal of a radical democracy and more just world. The possibility for such alliances, unity, and comprehensive understanding of politics among the youth of the world is greater than ever before, given the new technologies and the growing consciousness that power is now global and has generated a need for new modes of politics (Epstein 2014:41-44; Aronowitz 2014a; Aronowitz 2014b). It is time for authentic rage to transform itself into an international movement for the creation of a genuinely democratic formative culture and an effective strategy for social, political, and economic change.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, the 5th Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. See also, the Obama Administration’s publication of the third US National Climate Assessment, which provides a comprehensive and dire scientific assessment of generated of climate change, focusing on its effects on the US economy, as well as on various regions across the United States.

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