

CHAPTER 9

AGAINST ZOMBIE INTELLECTUALISM

On the Chronic Impotency of Public Intellectuals

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I've just read yet another think-piece decrying the sad state of affairs in the United States and ascribing it to a depoliticized, docile, stupid populous that is "easily seduced." It came out on June 24, 2017 and I read it on June 25, 2017 as people took to the streets across the country for Pride (to celebrate it and to push back against pinkwashing). This is just a few days after people across the country took to the streets to protest the acquittal of the cop who murdered Philando Castile. What is to explain this disconnect?

The piece I'm referring to is "Manufactured Illiteracy and Miseducation: A Long Process of Decline Led to President Donald Trump," by cultural critic and public intellectual Henry Giroux (2017). It's one of many articles of its kind, and is exemplary in its general representation of a certain brand of politics. In it, the distinguished professor Giroux mourns for a long-lost "civic culture," "public life," for the "foundations of democracy," and a time

before “the corruption of both the truth and politics.” The Trump administration, he admonishes, has “turned its back on education as a public good.” Even more so than formal institutions of school however, we have a wider cultural pedagogy that manufactures ignorance and illiteracy—our inability to see or read the truth:

Cultural apparatuses that extend from the mainstream media and the diverse platforms of screen culture now function as neoliberal modes of public pedagogy parading as entertainment or truthful news reporting. (Giroux, 2017, para. 9)

This isn’t just a bias against intellectuals and academics. It’s more: “It is a willful practice and goal used to actively depoliticize people and make them complicit with the political and economic forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives” (Giroux, 2017, para. 12).

What we—progressives and the Left—need to do is to understand that education can empower people, it can give the people tools to critically understand their lives so that they can overcome their ignorance and complicity, hold power accountable, and transform the world. With the election of Trump, we can’t wait. We need to foster the “ideological and subjective conditions that make individual and collective agency possible” (Giroux, 2017, para. 31). Once, apparently, this was just “an option,” but now it is “a necessity.”

THE PEOPLE, NOT INTELLECTUALS, MAKE HISTORY

What this piece ultimately does is whitewash the long history that has led to this climate. It rests on a triumphalist account of American democracy that is *only now* under attack. It denies any historical and existing agency that the people have. And it offers no real solutions. I call it *zombie intellectualism* because it feeds off of existing political struggles but serves only to demotivate and demoralize them. We’re all guilty of it from time to time, but the fact that it has become a niche in its own right should be alarming to those of us on the left.

Giroux is right that Trump has been a long time coming. But the decline didn’t begin with Fox News or Facebook. It began in 1492. It began with the genocide of the indigenous peoples. It accelerated with the slave trade and the formal institutionalization of white supremacy and slavery. It intensified during each war of colonial and imperial conquest—from the war against the Philippines in the late 19th century to the ongoing war against Syria. The conditions that allowed for the rise of Trump didn’t originate with the neoliberal attack on the public sector in the early 1980s. They are inscribed in the foundations of American democracy.

And yet this history of oppression has equally been a history of resistance. The legacies and fruits of this resistance are what we should be remembering, celebrating, and fighting to strengthen. And resistance is what we have seen since the election of Trump.

I don't exactly know why radical academics often fail to bring this into the narrative. It may be because of their general disconnection from political struggles and protest movements. But it may also be because academics have had little to do with this narrative. Distinguished professors have never made history strictly through their work as public intellectuals. History has been made by the masses, by organizers, by activists, by everyday people. Sometimes, these people have held professorships, but that has always been incidental.

This is not to brush off the ways that academics with radical politics have been attacked by the right wing, as Yasmin Nair has done. They must be defended. (But it is interesting to note that the ones who are attacked are not propagating liberal myths of American democracy.)

This is also not to say that spontaneous resistance is enough, or that there is no role for theory. On the contrary, theory is absolutely crucial. But theory doesn't come from the universities; it comes from the social movements themselves. Anyone who has helped organize in any way even the smallest of protests or political actions knows that there is no lack of theoretical debate that take place in our movements.

There has never been a time when the truth or politics have been uncorrupted or pure. And truth has never corresponded with politics in any straightforward manner. If anything, politics is the struggle to produce new truths, new realities, and this is ultimately a struggle over and for power. That's what we need to focus on building right now: power.

Giroux (2017) comes close to admitting this, writing that truth and politics are now corrupted because "much of the American public has become habituated to overstimulation and lives in an ever-accelerating overflow of information and images" (para. 5). Jodi Dean (2009) has dubbed our current era that of *communicative capitalism*, a merging of capitalism, networked technologies, and democracy that traps us in a reflexive circuit of information and critique. The answer, then, is not more information and more critique. The answer is to organize, to build, to multiply, and to intensify.

DON'T MOURN OR JUST WRITE, ORGANIZE!

I share Giroux's wish that there was more resistance. But I can't erase the incredibly hard work of the grassroots organizers and resisters in the United States. I know the discipline they have and the incredible sacrifices they make. Their labor should be honored, supported, and highlighted.

One current example of this is an initiative called The People's Congress of Resistance. It's a campaign uniting radical activists and organizers from a range of struggles, and it will convene at Howard University in Washington, DC on September 16–17, 2017. The initial conveners are from organizations like the American Indian Movement, the Full Rights for Immigrants Coalition, the Muslim American Alliance, and the Party for Socialism and Liberation. There are people organizing for all 50 states.

Exposing the U.S. Congress as the congress of millionaires and billionaires, it is building an alternative congress of the people, a true form of counterpower. If radical academics want to see the organic intellectuals they have read about in theory books, then they should be there. And if anyone wants to not just witness the beauty of the people in motion, but be a part of it, then you should be there.

It will be *yet another* manifestation of the collective agency of the people.

REFERENCES

- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Giroux, H. (2017, June 24). Manufactured illiteracy and miseducation: A long process of decline led to president Donald Trump. *Salon*. Retrieved from <https://www.salon.com/2017/06/24/manufactured-illiteracy-and-miseducation-a-long-process-of-decline-led-to-president-donald-trump/>