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Book Review

Stealing Innocence is a book in two parts. The first is a critical exposé of American consumer culture and the way that it exploits an ideological mythology of childhood innocence. The second section, which the title does not make clear, is an outline of a program to reconfigure education around models articulated in the works of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and Stuart Hall. Where the first three chapters work to disclose the methods and practices that a conservative, market capitalism deploys to restrict and contain child agency, the final three chapters function as a prescriptive methodology for revitalizing education around notions of critical citizenship and an active public sphere.

At the outset, Giroux articulates a need to dispense with the mythologies of childhood and innocence as innately "pure and passive" natural states. This definition, he claims, obstructs the way in which corporate culture (as well as conservative theorists like Neil Postman) crystallize child identity as a fixed entity and, as a consequence, a marketable entity. We must understand, he contends, the "politics of innocence" as a construct that is intensely racialized, commercialized, sexualized, and gendered, normalizing a version of authentic childhood as "nostalgic, white, middle-class, static, and passive." What essential definitions of innocence condition, more dangerously, are reactionary conservative panics about pornography, pedophilia, drugs, and working mothers as "corruptions of morality." Giroux argues that these reactionary reflexes fail to recognize the deep structural sources of "violence perpetuated by middle-class values and social formations such as conspicuous consumption, conformity, snobbery, and ostracism that produce racial, class, and gender exclusions" (16-17).
From this repositioning of the narrative of innocence, Giroux explores three arenas of child exploitation: child beauty pageants, heroin chic, and the commercialization of public schools. In each instance, Giroux focuses on the way that American culture displaces the growing problems of consumer capitalism onto children, confusing and blurring the productive, social bonds between child and adult. His fascinating analysis of the dynamics of the child beauty pageant reveals the way in which children are conditioned to identify through the needs and desires of the adult gaze and the trauma that such identification exercises on the production of autonomous selves. Although he focuses primarily on the high profile JonBenet Ramsey case, he accesses a wider discussion of child objectification, brilliantly uncovering the production of nymphet fantasy and the anxiety of necessarily having to found one’s self-construction on the need to “be someone else.”

His treatment of heroin chic and the emaciated waif as beauty ideal similarly demonstrates the way in which youth are cast as burdens and threats to public life, a false characterization of a whole generation as symbols of despair and pessimism. The paranoid attention to youth postures of boredom and addiction distracts attention from larger cultural forces—deindustrialization, downsizing, a horizon of dead end jobs, and a state increasingly organizing itself around principles of containment and surveillance—that produce youth malaise in the first place. By aestheticizing heroin damaged bodies, Giroux claims, we implicated ourselves deeper in the corruption of market consumerism that sees “the other” as object, reifying the object as sources for private sensations rather than as figures that should evoke moral responsibility and social involvement.

The real force of Giroux’s book, however, emerges in the last four chapters that express an anxiety over the growing encroachment of corporations on public schools, the last vestiges of the public sphere remaining for America’s young. Giroux’s tone is increasingly alarmist, but continuously supported with insightful readings into the way in which corporate culture’s new design for education is increasingly beginning to restructure educational practice “in the image of market culture,” manufacturing identities as passive receptacles of information. Distancing students from developing the tools needed for critical agency and the imperatives of democratic society, the infection of corporate interest in American education is largely mobilizing a consumer consciousness that conceives of the possibility of choice as a possibility of a range of goods and services. What Giroux begins to offer is a dual condemnation of both corporate culture and the current rhetoric of theory and postmodernity that satisfy themselves with either theory as an end in itself or indeterminacy as a solution for renewal. Resurrecting pedagogical strategies, Giroux argues for aggressive, transgressive border crossing, a need for theory that is radically committed to practice and altering the oppressive formations of dominant culture. Rallying for liberatory agendas of witness and asking for a commitment from the intellectual and academic community to recognize that our pedagogies are saturated with political meaning, Giroux inspiring envisions a transformative move toward a more democratic, less hierarchical structure for the construction of identity in child education.

Stealing Innocence is a remarkable treatment of American culture and further defends a need for the inclusion of children in identity politics. As an active, political negotiation with the apparatus of culture, Stealing Innocence uncovers the way in which increasingly silenced social groups like children find themselves relegated to the margins of a market based society. Its significance is the post Columbine, post 9/11 landscape of aggression toward youth from powerful conservative cultural forces is without question. As the diminishing public sphere and corporate-governmental mechanisms work increasingly to dislocate agency from sources of resistance, critical evaluation, and debate, Giroux’s book emerges as timely and necessary for opening the dialogue for a wider, more inclusive version of democracy.