

When Hope is Subversive

Henry A. Giroux

Is it possible to imagine hope for justice and humanity after the torture of Iraqi detainees (including some just in their teens) by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison? What does hope mean when the United States is virtually unchallenged as it incarcerates unprecedented numbers of young people of color? What does hope teach us at a time in which government lies and deception are exposed on a daily basis in the media and yet appear to have little effect on President Bush's popular support? What resources and visions does hope offer in a society where greed is considered venerable and profit is the most important measure of personal achievement and social advance? What is the relevance of hope at a time when most attempts to interrupt the operations of an incipient fascism appear to fuel a growing cynicism rather than promote widespread individual and collective acts of resistance?

It is hard not to believe that politics in American life has become corrupt, that progressive social change is a distant memory, or that hope is the last refuge of deluded romantics. Civic engagement seems irrelevant in light of the growing power of multinational corporations to privatize public space and time. We have less time—and fewer civic spaces—for experiencing ourselves as political agents. Market values replace social values. Power has become disconnected from issues of equity, social justice, and civic responsibility. People with the education and means appear more and more willing to retreat into the safe, privatized enclaves of the family, religion, and consumption. Those without the luxury of such choices pay a terrible price in what Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Globalization*, has called the “hard currency of human suffering.”

Given these social conditions, some theorists have suggested that democratic politics as a site of contestation, critical exchange, and engagement has come to an end. We must not give up so easily. Democracy has to be struggled over, even in the face of a most appalling crisis of educational opportunity and political agency. Cynicism breeds apathy—not the reverse. The current depressing state of our politics and the bankruptcy of our political language issues a challenge to us to formulate a new language and vision that can reframe questions of agency, ethics, and meaning for a substantive democracy.

Crafting such a new political language will require what I call “educated hope.” Hope is the precondition for individ-

ual and social struggle. Rather than seeing it as an individual proclivity, we must see hope as part of a broader politics that acknowledges those social, economic, spiritual, and cultural conditions in the present that make certain kinds of agency and democratic politics possible. With this understanding, hope becomes not merely a wistful attempt to look beyond the horizon of the given, but what Andrew Benjamin, in *Present Hope*, calls “a structural condition of the present.”

The philosopher Ernst Bloch provides essential theoretical insights on the importance of hope. He argues that hope must be concrete, a spark that not only reaches out beyond the surrounding emptiness of capitalist relations, anticipating a better world in the future, but a spark that also speaks to us in the world we live in now by presenting tasks based on the challenges of the present time. In *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, Bloch argues that hope cannot be removed from the world. Hope is not “something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is *not yet* in the sense of a possibility; that it could be there if we could only do something for it.”

In this view, hope becomes a discourse of critique and social transformation. Hope makes the leap for us between *critical education*, which tells us what must be changed; *political agency*, which gives us the means to make change; and the *concrete struggles* through which change happens. Hope, in short, gives substance to the recognition that every present is incomplete. For theorists such as Bloch and his more contemporary counterparts like Michael Lerner, Cornel West, and Robin D.G. Kelley, hope is anticipatory rather than messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic. Understood this way, the longing for a more humane society does not collapse into a retreat from the world but becomes a means to engage with present behaviors, institutional formations, and everyday practices. Hope in this context does not ignore the worst dimensions of human suffering, exploitation, and social relations; on the contrary, as Thomas Dunn writes, it acknowledges the need to sustain the “capacity to see the worst and offer more than that for our consideration” (in *Vocations of Political Theory*, edited by Jason A. Frank and John Tambornino).

Hence, hope is more than a politics, it is also a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents. Hope is the outcome of those educational practices and struggles that tap into memory and lived experiences while at the same time linking individual re-

Henry A. Giroux is the Global Television Network Chair at McMaster University in Canada.

sponsibility with a progressive sense of social change. As a form of utopian longing, educated hope opens up horizons of comparison by evoking not just different histories but different futures. Educated hope is a subversive force when it pluralizes politics by opening up a space for dissent, making authority accountable, and becoming an activating presence in promoting social transformation.

There is a long history in the United States of hope as a subversive force. Examples are evident in the struggles of the Civil Rights and feminist movements in the 1950s and 1960s against racism, poverty, sexism, and the war in Vietnam. More recent examples can be found among young people demonstrating against multinational corporations and the World Trade Organization in cities as diverse as Melbourne, Seattle, and Genoa. Hope was on full display among organized labor, intellectuals, students, and workers protesting together in the streets of New York City against Bush's policies and his followers at the Republican National Convention.

This is not to say that a politics and pedagogy of hope is a blueprint for the future: it is not. What hope offers is the belief, simply, that different futures are possible. In this way, hope can become a subversive force, pluralizing politics by opening up a space for dissent, contingency, indeterminacy. "For me," writes Judith Butler, "there is more hope in the world when we can question what is taken for granted, especially about what it is to be human" (cited by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham in *JAC* 20:4). Zygmunt Bauman in a conversation with Keith Tester (in *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*) goes further, arguing that the resurrection of any viable notion of political and social agency is dependent upon a culture of questioning, the purpose of which, as he puts it, is to "keep the forever unexhausted and unfulfilled human potential open, fighting back all attempts to foreclose and pre-empt the further unravelling of human possibilities, prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished."

The goal of educated hope is not to liberate the individual *from* the social—a central tenet of neoliberalism—but to take seriously the notion that the individual can only be liberated *through* the social. Educated hope as a subversive, defiant practice should provide a link, however transient, provisional, and contextual, between vision and critique on the one hand, and engagement and transformation on the other. That is, for hope to be consequential it has to be grounded in a project that has some hold on the present. Hope becomes meaningful to the degree that it identifies agencies and processes, offers alternatives to an age of profound pessimism, reclaims an ethic of compassion and justice, and struggles for those institutions in which equality, freedom, and justice flourish as part of the ongoing struggle for a global democracy. □

PERSONAL ESSAY

