BOOK REVIEWS

The Intellectual

Steve Fuller. Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005

Reviewed by **John M. Novak**, Brock University

Book jackets sometimes provide insightful provocation about the content and flavour of a text. Certainly the designers of the front jacket for Steve Fuller's *The Intellectual* intended to be provocative when they placed the words, "the positive power of negative thinking," at the top centre. Provocation, however, has its price, as these words are only part of the story of what intellectuals do. Sure, they will automatically question sources of power and say no to ideas monopolized by informants with bad track records. Intellectuals care about ideas and misleading, distorted, or false representations need to be countered. Saying no to falsehood and deception is a good thing, a vital part of living an educational life in and for a democratic society. But this nay-saying needs to be counter-balanced with the intellectual's desire to socially construct the larger "yes," the deeper sense of the bigger picture that is needed to comprehend what is going on and what is going down. Fuller's book is about the artful navigation of the neigh-saying and yea-saying functions of the intellectual. This is especially important for educators who question present day policies intended to crank out obedient workers in a consumer society and who seek more hopeful ways of approaching the world of ideas and democratic possibilities.

According to Fuller, intellectuals need to be both inquisitors and prospectors. In order to do both, he offers five bits of advice for budding intellectuals early in the book (p. 3). First, he states that intellectuals should work to see things from various points of view, but not lose their ability to evaluate what they see. Intellectual life is more than a spectator sport; it requires active participation and full contact with ideas. The job of the intellectual is not merely to describe but to prescribe. Second, intellectuals should be able to communicate ideas in a variety of mediums. To lack this ability is to be imprisoned in sound bytes and cut off from the richer possibilities of reflective thought. A good idea is a liberating idea and points to possibilities beyond words. Third, intellectuals should learn to think in shades of gray. Very seldom is something completely true or false. A subtle and nuanced understanding of something provides a richer vantage point for critique and construction. Fourth, because better interpretations are nuanced, budding intellectuals should see their opinions as counter-balancing rather than

reinforcing someone else's thoughts. Anyone who seeks only to restate another's thoughts runs the risk of becoming a follower, someone who has stopped thinking for oneself. Whatever else intellectuals should be, they should not be people who become mouthpieces for others. Finally, in the public arena, intellectuals should fight hard for their ideas but give in with grace when they are shown to be in error. Although intellectuals may have big egos and ambitions, the inherent aim of intellectual life transcends personal foibles and plans. To not see this is to be an imposter and degrader of intellectual intentions and processes.

The advice that Fuller provides is elaborated throughout the three main sections of the book in which he describes what it means to be an intellectual. In the first section he provides some thoughtful theses on the nature of intellectuals, namely that they were born on the wrong foot, are touched by paranoia, need a business plan, and want the whole truth. They were born on the wrong foot because Fuller asserts that the intellectual tradition began with the sophists, who got a bad rap from Plato and have not been able to live it down. Reinterpreting the sophist tradition, Fuller shows that they could be seen as prospectors of ideas who were able to try on a variety of vantage points in order to bring to life the potential inherent in the play of ideas. The paranoia of intellectuals is born of megalomania. Turning these character deficiencies into virtues, intellectuals believe that they are able to uncover the conspiracies hidden in the dominant culture and offer a deeper sense of what might be and what should be. The need for a business plan means that intellectuals can be useful to those with entrepreneurial aspirations. Intellectuals have a feel for the "Next Big Thing" and the ability to see through the "Last Big Thing." Being able to feel and critically think big enables those using this service to buy low and sell high. This section ends with Fuller showing the difference between seeking "only the truth" and seeking the "whole truth." The former involves such people as the expert or censor who attempt to make judgments about the simple truth, nothing more, nothing less. The latter requires imaginative probing to provide an explanatory framework for the extension of coherent possibilities. Visionary leaders and democratically-minded legislators participate in this aspect of intellectual life.

The second and third parts of the book deal with a dialogue between an intellectual and a philosopher and responses to frequently asked questions. Fuller acknowledges that philosophers and academics are suspicious of the intellectual's desire to simplify the inherent complexity of issues. Intellectuals, on the other hand, are on guard against the philosopher's and academic's tendency to become "epigones, clones, and affiliated drones" (p.69) for previous great thinkers or the power of the status quo. As Fuller states, "intellectuals consume academic research to produce higher forms of

knowledge” (p. 86). This, along with the idea that “anything worth saying can be said in other words” (p. 85), give the intellectual more maneuverability in constructing perspectives of wider validity. The frequently asked questions of the intellectual focus, on how to deal with politicians, academics, scientists, and philosophers and finding causes to champion. Needless to say, intellectuals distill key points and amplify their thinking so it is available to larger groups of people. It is not easy work, but intellectuals are dissatisfied with doing less. Ironically, one of the main tasks of the intellectual is to self-destruct by encouraging others to take on the challenge to thoughtfully move beyond the status quo.

So what are intellectuals and why should educators care about their activities? Fuller answers the first part of this question at the end of his book by saying, “The intellectual is the eternal irritant: the grit in the oyster out of which humanity will hopefully emerge as a pearl” (p. 163). Education is an emergent, intellectual enterprise based on the genesis, clarity, and consequences of ideas. For educators to fail to examine and explore ideas opens the door for misleading and distorting possibilities. Reading Fuller’s *The Intellectual* is a way to close the door of distortion and open deeper possibilities for educational life in a democratic society.

The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear

H. A. Giroux. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

Reviewed by **Denise Paquette-Frenette**, Brock University

This book spans broad territory, picking up on many political, social, and moral themes that Henry Giroux has previously explored in numerous publications. The book’s purpose is to urge educators to act as public intellectuals in denouncing the abandonment of America’s children, especially those who are poor or homeless, marginalized because of their race or class, and who attend derelict schools in which teachers work too hard for too little pay. Giroux feels that the situation of America’s children is a serious and unrecognized tragedy, a test of the country’s morality. He eloquently describes the prevailing culture’s “attack on public schools:”

Instead of providing a decent education to poor young people, we serve them more standardized tests. Instead of guaranteeing them food, decent health care, and shelter, we increase their rates of incarceration. (...) Instead of providing them with vibrant public

spheres, we offer them a commercialized culture in which consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship. (p. xviii)

The author claims that the injustices committed towards American youth have become more intense because of the repressive and punitive social policies since terrorist attacks on the U.S. in September 2001.

I found this book both inspiring and disappointing. Giroux has a great capacity for popularization and the dissemination of ideas, notably those of European sociologists such as Zygmunt Baum and Ulrich Beck. He writes passionately, advocating a broad-based social movement which would reverse the current social trend in the United States towards globalization, the overwhelming influence of corporations, and the privatization of public spheres such as schools, media, and government. The apparently pessimistic situation described in the first few chapters is transformed into a message of hope through the author's call for what he terms a realistic militant utopianism. His position is that educators and other public intellectuals must be guerillas in American culture's "sly war" against its children, in which schools are turned into penal institutions where not adhering to the dress code can lead to a few days in prison. The aims of education should be to help children and youth understand the relationship between power and knowledge. According to Giroux, this civil education occurs outside the schools, through "public pedagogy." Public culture and media construct students' perceptions of themselves and of their world, and children must be guided to critically examine public institutions and be engaged as political actors.

The breadth of the book is also a source of its weakness. Readers looking for an academic analysis and facts or ideas that can be applied to schools may be disappointed. Children and youth are described almost as an afterthought at the end of sentences. The relatively few facts concerning children are dated. The book deals even less with educators, whom the author subsumes under the generic category of 'public intellectuals.' These educators are perceived to be theorists and educational researchers; that is, people who define curriculum and educational policy, and not teachers in schools.

My disappointment with the book comes mostly from its rather chaotic structure. The 80-page introduction launches the theme of the war against America's youth. The following four chapters paint a general picture of the prevailing culture of fear and of the assaults on democracy in recent years. The next two chapters seem to have been written in another context; they present a critical analysis of two little-known films, *Ghost World* about adolescent girls, and *Baby Boy*, which describes unemployed Black youths. Finally, the last chapter deals with higher education and announces the ideas developed in Giroux's most recent book, co-authored with Susan Searles Giroux.

No concluding chapter clarifies this structure nor can convince the reader that the book constitutes a coherent whole.

Despite its weaknesses, Giroux's book sheds light on other contexts of struggle for culture. The general climate of neoliberalist culture as it is defined by Giroux constitutes as much of a threat to French-language education in Ontario as it does in the United States. The recently launched *Politique d'aménagement linguistique (PAL)*¹ (2004) is an attempt by the Ontario Ministry of Education to support language, culture and community in French-language schools, to reduce assimilation and counteract the pervasive influence of a global culture of consumerism. The cultural policy has been highly acclaimed by the Franco-Ontarian minority, which constitutes approximately five percent of the province's population. The PAL is based on the belief that children are at the heart of a minority community's identity, and that schools should focus on them as their primary priority, as warranty of its future. Giroux's views of culture and of the role of schools are different: in this book, he defines culture as media and popular culture, and claims that issues concerning children and youth should be inscribed in the private sphere of the family and not in schools. However, his passion, eloquence, and accumulation of examples and arguments concerning the situation in the United States serve as a cautionary tale for what could easily happen in Canada if the forces of privatization run rampant. Giroux feels children should be a central part of public discourse because they "occupy a territory on the periphery of the economic and cultural geography of neoliberal capitalism." His conceptual framework allows us to see that the aim of the PAL cultural policy contains a fundamental contradiction: it seeks to strengthen the pride of minority-language children in their cultural community, and at the same time to produce schools which will succeed in performance tests.

It will be interesting to follow both the evolution of Giroux's ideas about democracy now that he has moved to Canada, and the ways in which French-language schools through the PAL policy can create the "new vocabularies" and craft the "new modes of combat to enrich the practice of democracy" that Giroux calls for.