

## Human Rights and Democracy: Reading Giroux Otherwise with Levinas

Clarence W. Joldersma  
*Calvin College*

Henry Giroux's pedagogy, argues Matt Jackson, is "inherently violent" because it ensnares students in a political agenda of democracy and human rights. Jackson has a Levinasian aversion for such totalizing sameness, arguing that, because for Giroux all citizens are equal, they must have a sameness based in shared values. Human difference functions primarily as "outward adornment" in Giroux's idea of human rights and democracy. Human rights are entangled with the "pure perseverance of being," self-advocating for an assured place in the sun. Intrinsic to Giroux's human rights, Jackson implies, is demanding those rights for oneself, inevitably leading to violence against the other. Therefore, Giroux's critically-modified liberal politics is inherently violent. Levinas seems to agree, often remarking that all war starts with someone insisting, "this is my place in the sun." To avoid violence, on Jackson's reading, Levinas's ethics of difference must replace Giroux's politics of human rights.

There is another way of reading Giroux with Levinas, one that collapses Jackson's binary opposition. Perhaps surprisingly, Levinas actually advocates human rights.<sup>1</sup> For Levinas, human rights involve being spared the humiliations of poverty and torture, violence and cruelty (*EN*, 156). More positively, human rights denote the right to exist, outside of all marks of difference, including of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and language. Furthermore, human rights involve the right to independence and freedom, which Levinas calls the right to free will (*EN*, 155). This right is embodied concretely in the right to live, namely, the right to satisfy one's needs of daily life. This implies the right to occupations that earn enough for a decent standard of living; the right to well-being, including the right to beauty that makes life bearable; and perhaps even the right to weekends, paid vacations, and social security (*AT*, 146). Levinas's defense of human rights includes obligations to reshape social structures that would restrict their exercise and the responsibility to create the conditions that would establish them more firmly. In short, the implications of human rights for Levinas is the obligation to work towards refining "the human order of freedom" (*EN*, 156), because human rights derive their normative character from the right to free will (*AT*, 146). This defense makes Levinas sound closer to Giroux than Jackson's binary reading might suggest.

Levinas acknowledges the problem Jackson raises with Giroux, namely, the possibility of "a war of each against all, based on the Rights of Man" (*AT*, 147) — that one's autonomy, when imposed on another, causes "a violence suffered by that [other] will" (*EN*, 157). But for Levinas, the possibility of war "each against all" is not a question of whether human rights are intrinsically violent, but how they are justified. So, how does Levinas justify human rights without having a clash of free wills?

Levinas justifies them through a critique of Kant. The issue for Levinas turns on respecting both the *spontaneity* of free will as well its *extension beyond* one's self-preserving interest. Levinas points out that Kant's idea of practical reason doesn't "appease the irrepressible part of spontaneity" of the will (*EN*, 157). Kant's idea of *good will*, reason's universalizing respect for other wills in the context of one's own will, does not do justice to the *spontaneous* kernel of the will's freedom. The key for Levinas's justification is that the free will's spontaneity is something more than the self-interested inclinations Kant requires reason to overcome. But that spontaneity is also not reason's self-legislation, says Levinas; it remains a sensibility, something he identifies as "goodness" (*EN*, 157). Levinas calls goodness a "generous impulse," where generosity is meant to mark a sensibility that does not disqualify its freedom. Levinas translates the generous impulse of goodness as "responsibility for the other," a condition in which the other comes before me (*EN*, 157). The generosity of goodness privileges the other. As such, generosity does not originate from within the self, but is a stirring, from the outside, of a desire to commit to the other's well being.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Levinas's justification for human rights comes through responsibility for the other that is made visible through my felt obligation. Goodness interrupts my self-interest through awakening my responsibility to and for the other. Human rights thus mark that the status of the other is not a function of my choice. The language of human rights indicates the right of the other to exist beyond my human decision, comparison, and compromise (*EN*, 158).

Levinas grounds human rights in sensibility rather than in reason. The other is always in a position of precariousness with respect to oneself. My perseverance of being, my care about myself, shows that it is always possible if not probable to do violence to the other as I extend my free will. However, simultaneously, precisely when extending my free will, the other shows him or herself as the command, "thou shalt cause thy neighbor to live" (*AT*, 127). This command comes as an absolute, outside of any context that would limit this. The precariousness of the other, manifesting itself as an absolute obligation in me even as I assert my free will, shows itself as a human right. And so, Levinas emphasizes, human rights are, originally and absolutely, "the right of the other" (*AT*, 129).

We can now return to Giroux. Jackson interprets Giroux as advocating a classic liberal notion of democracy, where autonomous, reasonable citizens legislate rules of common benefit. Giroux's idea of democracy, argues Jackson, thus involves a problematic totality into which students and others are enveloped as they become social-change agents. Levinas's idea of human rights, however, gives an opening for reading differently Giroux's idea of democracy, one that largely avoids the totalizing interpretation. I'm suggesting Giroux is arguing for the rights of the other.

By "democracy" Giroux does not mean a common tradition (culture) that unifies. This nostalgia (for example, of Hirsch's backward glance) is precisely what Giroux wishes to avoid. Instead, Giroux describes democracy as a site of struggle, a place to reclaim justice, freedom, and difference.<sup>3</sup> Democracy is a struggle against

official ordering and sanctioning of government mandates and surveillance (*BC*, 155). Democracy is the ongoing contestation, in every aspect of daily life, of official interests that name reality for others. The idea of struggle indicates that Giroux does not have a totalizing understanding of democracy — it is not a known totality into which everyone ought to be enveloped. In fact, Giroux holds that imposing totalizing sameness from centers of power is decidedly *undemocratic*.

In contrast to a totality, democracy for Giroux is a struggle for freedom and human dignity that involves *extending* “principles of freedom, justice, equality to all spheres of life” (*BC*, 73). He marshals three stances to do this: modernism’s commitment to overcoming human suffering, postmodernism’s ability to challenge totalizing discourses through a politics of difference, and feminism’s grounding of vision in political projects (*BC*, 73). Together, Giroux believes, these can be mustered to extend freedom to the marginalized in our society by helping create conditions that will effectively struggle for *their* justice and give *them* voice. We might therefore plausibly interpret Giroux’s idea of extension in terms of Levinas’s notion of goodness as generous impulse: given our self-interested perseverance of being, democracy means becoming aware of the disrupting call of the marginalized others and extending human rights to them.

Giroux’s ethics is thus not an after-thought, but is central to his vision of democracy. We can interpret the struggles he calls democracy as being energized by a sensibility that is not a function of calculating reason, but a refusal to accept needless human suffering and oppression. He sounds decidedly Levinasian when he says: “ethics is a practice that connotes one’s personal and social sense of responsibility to the Other” (*BC*, 74). Reading Giroux this way suggests that his critical approach is not necessarily inherently violent, but is offering a view of democracy that extends human rights to the other through a Levinasian generous impulse. From this more generous vantage point, Giroux’s critical pedagogy of human rights and democracy may even be seen as a way of avoiding violence.

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1. See Emmanuel Levinas, “The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other,” in *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); “The Rights of Man and Good Will” in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and “The Prohibition Against Representation and ‘The Rights of Man’” and “The Rights of the Other Man,” in *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). These latter two books will be cited as *EN* and *AT*, respectively, in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace and Human Rights* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1993), 107.

3. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), 154. This work will be cited as *BC* in the text for all subsequent references.