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# Disneyworld is not enough

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*THE MOUSE THAT ROARED. Disney and the end of innocence. Henry A. Giroux. 186pp. Rowman and Littlefield, 12 Hid's Copse Road, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9JJ. £16.95. 0 8476 9109 8.*

Corporate America and the religion of consumption

Henry A. Giroux's tract against the Disney Corporation aims to expose the cultural manipulations of global corporate capitalism, as embodied by the Disney Corporation, and its allegedly malign effects on children and families struggling to find what Christopher Lasch called a haven in a heartless world. The haven - paradoxically, however - turns out to be none other than the escapist world of Disney, on sale to all consumers at the local Disney store. Let the circle of consumption be unbroken.

As a starting point, Giroux's contention is at once fecund and ironic, and deserves a thorough exploration; the Disney Corporation is an obvious, if slightly too obvious, place to begin. Unfortunately, while Giroux avoids the deadly academic jargon of "cultural studies", and writes in a pleasingly conversational style, he none the less smothers his project by never really demonstrating this thesis; the book simply repeats the premise in endless ways. So, for example, toward the beginning Giroux says:

How children learn and what they learn, in a society in which power is increasingly held by megacorporations, raises serious concerns about what noncommodified public spheres exist to safeguard children from the ravages of a market logic that provides neither a context for moral considerations nor a language for defending vital social institutions and policies as a public good.

Well, excellent, one thinks. But for this to hold water, we are going to have to know a lot more about what it means to say, for example, that "power is increasingly held by megacorporations". Giroux means, of course, the ability to manipulate culture and cultural messages and, specifically in this passage, to manipulate the education of the young. But notwithstanding numerous facts about Disney's wealth and the stock-option-generated wealth of its chief executives (although 1999 was not a good year for Disney, and its chief executive Michael Eisner received no annual bonus, on account of Disney's poor performance), and extensive discussion of its penetration into American and, indeed, global home life, through the unified and co-ordinated marketing of a vast array of consumer products, Giroux never really makes clear the causal connections. Nor does he even propose causal connections that might be plausible, even if not, strictly speaking, provable. I say this, understanding perfectly well the difficulties in "proving" these kinds

of cultural connections, and with considerable sympathy towards the view that one may permissibly be persuaded of a certain strand of "cultural logic", even though it cannot be shown line by line, so to speak; culture is not computer code, and neither is its logic. Yet it must consist of something more than the repeated assertion, and that never really happens in this book.

A reason why this never happens is that *The Mouse That Roared* takes entirely for granted what the morality is that the Disney Corporation allegedly undermines. It turns out to be simply whatever it is that correctly thinking, politically progressive folk happened to think in 1999. Giroux seems anxious to demonstrate again and again that his cultural criticism is not, heaven forbid, "conservative", notwithstanding that it asserts a certain kind of family values. The delicate dance of *The Mouse That Roared* is simultaneously to attack the cultural values of Disney, while fending off any implication that Giroux might have a weak spot for conservative Christian family values. To those of us who are neither political progressives nor especially interested in the annual permutations of their dogmas, this is all rather a yawn, and it distracts from the effort needed to go beyond assertions actually to reveal strands of cultural logic which, in the case of Disney, I quite agree are there.

Being indifferent, in other words, as to whether either Disney or Giroux is committed to "social justice" as the Left defines it, I am left hungry as to the exact nature and origin of Disney's ideological messages. Giroux is surely flat wrong when he says that "corporations such as Disney do not give a high priority to social values, except to manipulate and exploit them"; it is true only in so far as Giroux understands "manipulate" and "exploit" merely to mean the promotion of values that depart from his own rather narrow social and political agenda. On the contrary, it is clear that in many instances Disney is in the business of selling social values; it is the measure of Disney's success that it is able to persuade consumers to see, and take their children to see, some astonishingly crude exercises in values education.

A film such as *Pocahontas*, for example, is a numbing animation of the official Forbes-500 corporate message of racial and ethnic diversity and tolerance, wrapped in a fashionable story of the sins of white interlopers in America together with a bit of implied environmentalism. True, several Disney animated films have got themselves in trouble for alleged racism in identifying certain undesirable animal characters - the hyenas in *The Lion King*, for example - with African-American voices, but Disney's problems have been no worse than other corporations attempting to navigate the rapids of political correctness.

And on the equally touchy subject of gender, Disney's animated films - starting with its one genuine masterpiece in recent decades, *Beauty and the Beast* - are filled with strong girls defying the evil forces of patriarchy and machismo. True enough, a stalwart progressive can construct another reading of all these strong girls, as Giroux does; that they always return to the box of male authority, albeit a reformed one. Disney's gender message, the gender-irredentist might say, is not the rejection of men, but instead their moral reform; *Beauty* marries not the macho Gaston but the reformed Beast. Naturally,

within the cultural logic of Disney, the reformed Beast is handsome, which is an annoyance to the political correctness of Giroux's ethics; still, it bears noting that, within the cultural logic of Grimm, reformed males turn out frequently to be not only handsome but princes to boot.

But surely it is hard to resist the conclusion that Disney and predominant corporate America stand for a certain corporatist form of liberal politics and moderately progressive cultural views. Corporate America, especially those companies which produce consumer goods that depend upon culture, fashion and advertising to sell them, is plainly not culturally conservative, at least not as that term is understood by American cultural conservatives; the American corporation freely inculcates progressive views, particularly in the matter of identity politics of race and gender, and tolerance and diversity, at the box office. How could corporate America be culturally conservative, when the only ironclad law of marketing is, and always will be, that sex sells? Giroux wants to say that, merely because it is not culturally conservative, it is not thereby "progressive", in Giroux's sense, and that that, finally, is its real failing. Still, it seems somewhat churlish of Giroux to go on insisting, on behalf of Left cultural politics, that its efforts are merely a sop and do not go far enough; a more clear-sighted observer, coming perhaps from the cultural Right, might have thought, rather, that Disney had offered to do a great deal of Giroux's work for him and that he might be more properly grateful.

But *The Mouse That Roared* identifies another social problem posed by Disney, separate from the slipping of social and political agendas down consumer throats. It is the manipulation, especially of the young, by completely co-ordinated consumerist campaigns, campaigns which teach market consumption as the essence of a person's identity: you are what you buy, and those who cannot or do not buy suffer from, in Zygmunt Bauman's phrase, the "poverty of flawed consumers". These campaigns stretch, as every parent knows, from the original movie to action-figure dolls to fast-food tie-ins to those Victorian Jane costumes (yellow full-length dress, hat and parasol) that paraded up the walk of our house last Halloween when Tarzan appeared at the local cinema. Giroux is strongest in observing the "totalizing" effects of this consumer culture created by corporations such as Disney, especially on the young; they have little that is culturally outside the corporate box. However politically constricted the ethic against which he measures Disney, he is not wrong to be anxious about whether there remains any social space that is not dominated by ever more intrusive corporate marketing, any source of identity for the young that is not created by advertising.

"Totalizing" culture is closely associated with a characteristic feature of the Disney mystique - escapism. Seemingly, no business has ever been so successful in creating, as a deliberately corporate alternative to "public space", the whole zone of personal and family escape represented by Disneyworld and EuroDisney. The physical escape is fused with considerable success to the world of imagination trademarked by Disney, and the whole effect is heightened by being swaddled in nostalgia for childhood and childhood's sense of safety. That children adore it is not surprising; Giroux, somewhat ruefully and also somewhat defensively, says repeatedly that he does not want to deny the joy that Disney and its escapist fantasies have provided to so many children and families,

including his own. Yet adults, and not merely parents, also adore Disneyworld in remarkable numbers; given that, for a generation now, childhood memories in America have generally included a generous dose of Disney, it is perhaps unsurprising that adult nostalgia is Disney-tinged and that Disneyworld has become a house of retreat in the modern world.

But a retreat from what? From the world and its pressures and cares, naturally; and, the stern anti-consumptionist moralist would also add, from pressures and cares that arise from so much striving to consume and to obtain the resources to consume so much. This is perhaps overstating the desire of parents to take their children to a place guaranteed to give them a good time, while being safe and sufficiently varied to give Mom and Dad a good time too, but the irony of a "retreat" from the pressures of a world of consumption to a world of consumption still lingers.

Giroux also takes on the daunting task of describing Disney's other, wide-ranging business interests, but less successfully. These include all the other entertainment products and movies produced by Disney which have long since departed Disney's family-friendly corporate image. The Mouse That Roared gives particular attention to Disney's ownership of the ABC television network, including the network's news division which, Giroux notes, has seen its editorial independence curtailed when it comes to its parent's corporate image. In this effort to explore the whole of Disney's business world, he is markedly less successful, because this would require a different set of investigative skills, starting with an MBA, and would produce a very different book. That exploration would inevitably have to address how Disney will step into the world of the Internet and interactive media; Disney must be reckoned to have the strongest ready-made "content" for the new media.

So far, it has not really deployed itself in cyberspace, and probably cannot effectively do so until so-called "broadband" technology is widely available, at least in the United States, vastly to extend the usability of interactive media over the Net. But when it does, the question of social manipulation of the young will become even more pressing, because the Net has the potential to bring the corporation into the home even more than television does. The irony will be, perhaps consistent with Giroux's analysis of how Disney opens new markets, that it will achieve the greatest penetration in American homes by positioning itself, in contrast to so much else on the Internet, as the family-friendly alternative - as, of course, Disney always has. Disney will, perhaps, propose to partner with parents to protect their children from the wild, bad side of the Net.

Yet ultimately, the question for Giroux, which his progressive politics does not really allow him to address, is whether the totalizing Disney phenomenon - and, by extension, the totalizing consumerism urged by American corporations in general - is supply meeting democratic, popular, mass demand, or whether it is instead the manipulated creation of demand. Of course, the answer is, well, both.

Consumers want what they want, and corporations also manufacture demand to get them to want it, especially among children. But critics of the consumption culture - those

willing to challenge the blithe, libertarian assumptions of free choice - face an unpalatable issue in attempting to draw the lines of "authentic" versus "manufactured" and, hence, "inauthentic" demand. After all, actually doing anything about it, as a matter of politics and policy rather than exhortation and railing against the consumptionist ethic, requires decidedly unlibertarian actions by the State, to interfere not only with corporate choices but with consumer choices as well. Giroux, presumably, does not have a significant problem with this, because his political beliefs provide him with criteria by which to decide what is good for people, or at least good for children, and what is not. Being a serious progressive, in a lineage starting with Rousseau and Saint-Just and all those happy to distinguish between the "popular will" and the "general will", or between "consumer" and "citizen" in Giroux's lexicon, Giroux is willing to impose those criteria on society.

But the rest of us are not as sure as Giroux. We are also well aware that there are those, also willing to regulate the market in these matters, who vehemently disagree with Giroux's criteria and have different, albeit equally strident ones to put in their place. Gary Bauer, the Christian conservative head of the Family Research Council, said something profoundly true and splendidly quotable when he declared to his fellow conservatives that "there's nothing sacred about the market". Admiring as I am of Bauer's willingness to challenge the supposedly "natural" authority of the market, however, I am nonetheless unwilling to have either him or Giroux making decisions for me or my family about the content of that market. Serious disagreement about what to put in Disney's place leaves me, at least, unwilling further to regulate that market, despite a shared anxiety about the declining cultural, political and social space outside of corporatism. This is, in part, because, unlike Giroux, I am equally or still more concerned about declining public space outside a State that, in the name of "protecting children", is more and more intent upon regulating families.

Focused as Giroux is on the corporation, and warmly disposed as his politics incline him to be towards the State as regulator in the name of the common good, he seemingly cannot conceive that the issue of the occupation of "public space" is always doubly fraught between the sometimes competing, sometimes co-operating colonizations by market and State. So it is left, to a large extent, to individual parents to draw the lines as seems to them best. For some, it may mean getting rid of the television set and the video altogether, as my wife and I have done. For others, it may mean "home schooling" (an increasingly popular educational choice in the United States that serves as a way of minimizing the intrusion of both corporation and State into the upbringing of children).

Everyone has to struggle with simply saying "no" to their children. Others will swallow the draught of popular culture whole, starting with Disney and McDonald's, and their lives are both less meaningful and more mediocre than they could be. Yet in the face of real disagreement about what the content of "non-corporatized" public space might be, Disney and the rest of corporate America at least have the virtue of delivering precisely what Giroux complains of, viz, the consensus of what might be called "the market in family values". Of necessity, it is the dumbed-down, thinnest, lowest-common-denominator version available, but it has something that Giroux systematically

undervalues because of his certainty in his own values, which is some small measure of mass, if not precisely democratic, legitimacy.

Obviously, leaving it to parents simply to say "No" to corporate values is not a very attractive solution, because not even fundamentalist Christian families can live in genuine isolation from the market. Individual, atomized parents are rarely serious competition for the pressure of the adolescent peer cohort. Moreover, the effort to construct an individual family culture in opposition to the dominant corporate-consumer culture is something quite different, and less desirable, than it would be to live in a society in which corporate-consumer culture was simply less dominant; the counter culture, after all, carries pathologies all its own. The Mouse That Roared is right to lament the loss of "noncommodified public spheres" to the forces of corporatism - spaces in which children and adolescents could find support for values broadly accepted by their families, but within a matrix larger than the nuclear family which could, one hopes, at least partly co-opt and contain the adolescent peer cohort. But if the alternative is for Giroux's - or Pat Buchanan's or Al Gore's or George W. Bush's - State to instruct us on what else to fill it with, which is the strong if dangling implication of The Mouse That Roared, then we are better off as we are. One arrives at certain forms of libertarianism without enthusiasm, but as merely the least bad alternative.