Back to the Dark Ages: Neoliberalism and The Decline of Labor and Education

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Abstract

This paper addresses the convergence of inequality across social and economic dimensions in the United States. Chief among these are wealth accumulation, labor, and education. Specifically, I discuss the transference of wealth to the top of the income hierarchy, the automation and polarization of labor, and threats to public education. Additionally, I implicate neoliberalism in this multidimensional decline of social privileges, and I conclude with a glimpse into a dystopian future.

Keywords: neoliberalism, inequality, labor polarization, underemployment, charter schools, charter investments, college rankings, Obama Administration, hegemony

Introduction

Are we on a trajectory back to the Dark Ages, and are the lords even offering a guise of protection this time? Or are they interested in replacing us with automatons, such as Toshiba's humanoid customer service representative (Hongo, 2015)? One cannot use a computer or go about town without encountering functions that have been automated – work for wages that is gone. Secondly, if a large human workforce in the United States is becoming increasingly unnecessary, what is the value in properly educating the redundant? Bluntly, the evidence of social decline in the U.S. is abundant through wage polarization and higher unemployment (Autor, 2010; Longworth, 1998; Piketty, 2014), erosion of social protections (Bauman, 2007; Giroux, 2014; Liptak, 2014), hijacking of public education (Ravitch, 2010, 2014; Watkins, 2012), and biased entertainment news media and sham politics (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2014; Kellner, 1995; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005; Zizek, 2009). Moreover, as I reflect on this convergence of labor, education, and other social factors, I have difficulty recognizing the country I was educated to believe is my home. Now, I see much less of a land of opportunity and liberty and more of fiefdoms of plutocratic lords (Freeland, 2012; Piketty, 2014). Similarly, Watkins (2012) stated:

> "Capital simply doesn't need the U.S. working class in the same way it did through the stages of early capitalism, maturing capitalism, and even imperialism. This is the basis of the demolition of the social contract that guaranteed economic security for a large section of the population and a

> safety net for those at subsistence. This is the basis for the attacks on our constitutional rights and universal education." (p.19)

Certainly, Watkins' words ring of truth, though it would seem that capital no longer needs a wider range of employees to also include much of the middle class (Autor, 2010; Abel, Dietz, & Su, 2014).

While a number of critical theorists have discussed the erosion of social privileges in the West (Aronowitz, 2001; Bauman, 2007; Giroux, 2014; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005; Watkins, 2012; Zizek, 2009), particularly in conjunction with education, this theoretical paper endeavors to expand on their work by more extensively substantiating it with findings and other deductions concerning labor, economics, fiscal policy, and neoliberal politics in general for a multidimensional discussion of growing inequality in the United States, where among leading Western nations it is arguably greatest (Piketty, 2014). Further, this paper ponders the implications of these trends on human beings.

Neoliberalism and Inequality

Ronald Wright referred to capitalism as a progress trap in the documentary film, *Surviving Progress* (Louis, Robert, Flahive, Crooks, & Roy, 2011). That is, as humans have made excess progress in capitalism, repercussions threaten our existence. Yet, propelled by neoliberalism (Apple, 2006; Robertson, 2007), capitalism reigns largely unchecked in the global capitalist system, eroding the conditions of employees (Bauman, 2007; Longworth, 1998; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), and generally laying waste to Earth (Morton, 2013; Zizek, 2009).
While the origins of neoliberalism are located in the personal freedoms and property rights of liberalism, addressed by Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Hobbs, neoliberalism underscores the imperative of unrestrained accumulation via the laissez faire market, perpetuated by government whose role is to ensure it (Robertson, 2007). Indeed, since neoliberal ideology triumphed over Keynesian philosophy in the United States by the 1980s (Aronowitz, 2001; Robertson, 2007; Winfield, 2012), many economists do not challenge the neoclassical theory of the economy (Nelson, 2006). They believe the "invisible hand" produces the healthiest outcome, though as theorized as an objective machine, it does not account for the well-being of those who fail to excel in the system (Nelson, 2006). Of course, however, embraced by the Washington Consensus, neoliberal policy has brought about a sizeable transfer of wealth to the ruling class (Piketty, 2014; Robertson, 2007). Indeed, as Piketty (2014) stated:

> "In support of this thesis, it is important to note the considerable transfer of US national income – on the order of 15 points – from the poorest 90 percent to the richest 10 percent since 1980. Specifically, if we were to consider the total growth of the US economy in the thirty years prior to the crisis, that is, from 1977 to 2007, we find that the richest 10 percent appropriated three-quarters of the growth. The richest 1 percent alone absorbed nearly 60 percent of the total increase of US national income in this period. Hence for the bottom 90 percent, the rate of income growth was less

> that 0.5 percent per year. These figures are incontestable, and they are striking; whatever one thinks about fundamental legitimacy of income inequality, the numbers deserve close scrutiny. It is hard to imagine an economy and society that can continue functioning indefinitely with such extreme divergence between social groups." (p. 297)

While this transfer of wealth is alarming, even compared to other leading industrialized nations (Piketty, 2014), Piketty further warned of a slowing global growth rate, returning to nineteenth century levels by the end of the century, where inherited wealth will play a more prominent role and income and upward social mobility will be much more difficult. Yet, as disturbing as this is, many individuals, excluded from the upper echelons of the U.S. economy have been ardent supporters of neoliberal policies. As counterintuitive as this seems, strong hegemonic forces have been at work.

Neoliberal Hegemony and its Allies

Zizek (2009) addressed the phenomenon of the seemingly nonsensical support of neoliberal policies by the masses concisely with the analogous question "who needs direct repression when one can convince the chicken to walk freely into the slaughterhouse?" (p. 34). The media, however, is quite the trickster, and the slaughterhouse is rather prolific. Indeed, the media in the U.S. and, particularly, Fox News have taken the art of manipulation to new heights, not only misrepresenting the role of the U.S. government as a benevolent world leader (Chomsky, 1999, 2002; Kellner, 1995; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), but, along with complicit politicians, swaying large segments of the population to neoliberal ideology by wedding it with conservative Christian values, slogans of reduced taxes, and racism, particularly in the Bible Belt (Alexander, 2012). Thus, proponents of neoliberalism have forged a formidable alliance with neoconservatives and authoritarian populists (Apple, 2006).

Even though there is considerable disparity within the centiles of the upper decile of the wealth distribution in the U.S., scores of well-educated and relatively affluent professionals of the lower ranks, including many academics, for now live comfortably, believing wholeheartedly in the fairness of meritocracy (Piketty, 2014; Zizek, 2009). After all, it is no simple feat to know the truth in a world where little more than a handful of corporations control all major news networks (Chomsky, 1998, 2002). Moreover, the U.S. political system has been growing openly corrupt, particularly as the Supreme Court has removed various campaign finance caps in recent decisions (Liptak, 2014). While these rulings have allowed unions more influence in politics, as they do corporations and affluent individuals, unions are fewer in number, their pockets are not as deep, and they are under attack from the neoliberal machine (Edwards, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). In fact Gilens and Page (2014) have pronounced government policy "dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans." Concurrently, the state of labor in the U.S. has become increasingly bleak in recent decades. So degraded has labor become in the media that many workers are hostile to their own interests (Alexander, 2012; Zizek, 2009).

Yet, as previously mentioned, labor is not in decline merely because people have been conditioned to oppose their own best interests, worker rights are being eroded through the extraction of increasing labor, often for less compensation, and through competition, primarily with technology (Autor, 2010).

Neoliberal Policy and Labor

Previously, I noted Piketty's (2014) prediction of much lower global growth and higher income concentration from capital, but he also described inequality of labor from income in the U.S. as currently the most pronounced, noting it is "probably higher than in any other society at any time in the past, anywhere in the world, including societies in which skill disparities were extremely large . . ." (p. 265). While this may seem sensational, Longworth (1998) also noted the simple dictate of supply and demand in relation to worker compensation in the U.S., given "No other major country treats its workers as commodities in this way, as raw materials or components that can be bargained to the lowest price" (p. 75). That is, employers seek to extract increasing surplus labor from employees in a system of competition (Rifkin, 2014) and for shareholder profit (Nelson, 2006).

While Piketty (2014) discussed that income inequality in the U.S. was never as low as most have perceived, workers in the U.S. reaped the rewards of the post-World War II boom (Longworth, 1998; Piketty, 2014; Robertson, 2007). Yet, by the 1960s "The balanced compromise between defense of welfare and liberal international economic order that had sustained three decades of growth and progress was now seriously destabilized . . . the golden years were over" (Robertson, 2007, p. 4), Keynesianism was thoroughly defeated by the 1980s with the rise of Reagan and Thatcher (Aronowitz, 2001; Piketty, 2014; Robertson, 2007), and as neoliberalism was triumphant, labor really began its decline (Aronowitz, 2001; Piketty, 2014; Robertson, 2007). Reagan fired thousands of air traffic controllers after they protested stressful working conditions, and millions of middle class industrial workers became displaced, reduced to lower paying work, as U.S. manufacturing declined. As Longwood (1998) described:

> "The impact on labor was devastating. First, in the 1970s, low-skilled workers had lost the good jobs that manufacturing once provided and were forced to scrap for lower-paying jobs. Then, in the 1980s, they were joined by higher-skilled workers displaced by technology and the downsizing of growing globalization. Suddenly, once-prosperous employees, many of them members of the middle class, found themselves competing for low-wage jobs with unskilled workers." (p. 94)

Yet, this large sector of the economy that had once sustained comfortable industrial workers has continued to decline. Between 2000 and 2010 U.S. manufacturing witnessed a one quarter reduction in force (Tong, Tong, & Tong, 2012). Many of these positions have been offshored by corporations seeking cheaper labor, as the U.S. prioritizes war over economic goals, unlike most nations (Tong et al., 2012). According to Autor (2010), however, many other U.S. jobs have been lost due to their automation. Further, Autor (2010) found automation the greatest factor leading to unemployment.

The Polarization of Employment in the U.S.

According to Autor (2010), wage polarization has risen sharply since the early 1990s due largely to automation, but also to other factors, including offshoring, international trade agreements, and a relative rise in wages for some college graduates. As a result, there has been a significant decline of the middle class, and this decline has extended beyond manufacturing to middle skill clerical labor, as many clerical tasks have been automated. Indeed, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) projected that in 2020 over a third of occupations in the U.S. will not require a post-secondary education. Further, abstract tasks, typically associated with higher wage labor, and tasks that are manual in nature, such as many lower paying jobs, are more insulated from automation (Autor, 2010). These factors speak to polarization of labor, particularly, as middle skill office workers, sales employees, and production workers have declined in employment share, as established by a nearly 12% drop between 1979 and 2009 (Autor, 2010). While Watkins (2012) stated, “Capital simply doesn’t need the U.S. working class in the same way it did through the stages of early capitalism, maturing capitalism, and even imperialism” (p. 19), this assessment may be extended to the middle class.

Furthermore, as demand for middle skill labor has declined, remaining middle skill work has suffered wage stagflation (Autor, 2010). According to Reich, while the average male worker in 1978 earned over $48,000, adjusted for inflation in the U.S., his counterpart in 2010 earned a comparable $33,000 (Chaiken, Dosa, Dungan, Silverstein, & Kornbluth, 2013). Indeed, this is further evidence of the socio-economic regression of labor, and Autor (2010) noted this “employment polarization is widespread across industrialized economies; it is not a uniquely American phenomenon” (p. 2).

Unemployment and Underemployment

While wage stagnation has been a problem for many U.S. workers in recent decades, unemployment has also worsened. Despite many economists’ faith in Say’s Law, the belief that technology begets new jobs to replace the ones it destroys, the law is, after all, merely a theory (Freeland, 2012). Indeed, Jim Clifton (2015), CEO of the Gallup Organization, recently underscored that the recent high employment rates of the post-recession recovery are misleading, as the reported low figure of 5.6 percent unemployment does not address that many jobs are only part-time and that many discouraged, long-term unemployed individuals, are not counted in the figure. In fact, a recent Gallup Poll found that only 44% of adults in the U.S. are employed full-time (Clifton, 2015). Clearly, there are significant problems in the U.S. economy, and the overall continual decline of labor in the U.S. over several decades is rather disturbing.

Significant Inequality in Educated Labor

Though higher skilled employees have fared better that middle skill employees in recent decades, much more can be described about employment patterns in the upper tiers of the U.S. economy. In the 1990s Longwood (1998) already likened U.S. consultants, upper skilled employees, to third-world plumbers, given the temporary nature of their work and lack of benefits. Also, Piketty (2014) discussed that very much wealth inequality can be explained by the rise of "supermanagers," a largely U.S. phenomenon. That is "in many large US firms there are far more than five executives whose pay places them in the top 1 percent (above $352,000 in 2010) or even the top 0.1 percent (above $1.5 million)" (Piketty, 2014, p. 302). In other words it would be a misconception to assume that relatively skilled workers, or perhaps typical college graduates, are necessarily generally successful. For indeed, Autor (2010) underscored there has been a hollowing of the middle class.

While many college graduates have continued to find skilled positions after graduating, it has been taking them longer (Abel et al., 2014), and "when a third of the workforce is college educated, not all college-educated workers will be managers or professionals" (Autor, 2010, p. 10). Thus, there have not been enough managerial and professional positions to employ all college graduates. Furthermore, Abel et al. (2014) suggested that the high rate of employment of graduates in 2000 was merely an exception after which the demand for information workers returned to typical levels. However, while the rate of underemployment of recent graduates for 2009-2011, the years analyzed, was much greater than in 2000, it was still somewhat greater than in 1990, as well (Abel et al., 2014). Additionally, underemployed graduates of 1990 had better jobs. "The share of underemployed college graduates in good non-college jobs has fallen sharply, while the share working in low-wage jobs has risen, with most of these changes occurring since 2000" (Abel et al., 2014, p. 5). While Abel et al. (2014) also noted different rates of employment across college majors, the overall trend supports devalued perceptions of the utility of a college education for employment purposes, as more college graduates have been unable to secure stable white collar employment.

Hoarders

As Piketty (2014) noted, wealth inequity in the United States is four times greater than the nation's tremendous trade imbalance, the latter previously cited as the major reason for the staggering decline in employment of the U.S. manufacturing sector (Tong et al., 2012). In fact Piketty (2014) also noted that even the net asset positions of wealthy countries, including the U.S. are negative, suggesting that powerful elites are hoarding large sums for which they are not accounting. This is also akin to Reich's (Chaiken et al., 2013) discussion of inequality in the U.S, as he noted the failure of the very affluent to return enough funds to the economy. Furthermore, Grignon (2009) addressed this immense accumulation that is not reinvested into the economy as the pivotal driver behind a banking system that must create more debt to sustain the economy. If true, the scenario is unsustainable. For while the elite are growing tremendously rich, they are impoverishing the rest.

Similarly, where profit for the corporate elite is concerned, Rifkin (2014) explained that as corporations find ways of cutting costs, including extracting surplus labor from employees and automating more functions, competition will drive profits down to such a marginal rate that capitalism will collapse, giving rise to a cooperative or sharing economy. Though this is questionable, Rifkin (2014) did also note policies may favor monopolies, as conglomerates attempt to preserve themselves. Indeed, Reich (2015) recently suggested we are moving into an era when machines will do the predictable jobs, while human beings will be relegated to odd jobs without the guise of security. As a case in point, Reich (2015) discussed Amazon's Mechanical Turks, a new system in which employers circumvent minimum wage requirements for odd jobs that computers cannot yet complete. Somehow this seems eerily similar to the experience of Irish immigrants to the Antebellum Southeastern United States, as plantation owners hired them to complete tasks deemed too dangerous for valuable slaves (Takaki, 1993). That is, more workers are becoming the expendable labor that employers value below machines. Though, technology holds the potential to emancipate human beings from toil, as Marcuse pointed out (Aronowitz, 2001), labor is increasingly competing for its existence with machines while capitalism and bureaucracies have been holding us in a state of what has been "relatively comfortable 'unfreedom'" (Aronowitz, 2001, p. 12) in the West, at least thus far.

Plundering Education

While inequality of wealth has been surging to new heights in the U.S., policies have been gutting public education expenditures. The wealthiest citizens have paid far fewer taxes in recent decades, resulting in social spending that has flat lined, (Piketty, 2014), and the federal government has not made public education a priority (Giroux, 2014). For instance, "over the period 1932-1980 . . . the top federal income tax rate in the United States averaged 81%" (Piketty, 2014, p. 507), while today it is 35%. The tax on capital gains is even lower, and the off shore accounts of the very rich should not be forgotten. Concurrently, since the 1980s the share of national income earmarked for social spending has evened out, as in Western Europe, but the amount is significantly lower in the U.S. (Piketty, 2014). Moreover, in 2013 the federal government spent 19 times its investment in education on military spending (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2014). Also, while the federal government "spent $92 billion in direct and indirect subsidies to businesses and private-sector corporate entities—expenditures commonly referred to as 'corporate welfare'—in fiscal year 2006" (Slivinski, 2007), it spent little more than a third of that amount on education in 2013 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2014). Thus, federal education expenditures are low relative to other major programs, and the top one percent, or the upper tiers of it, contribute less, proportionally, than the less affluent.

Yet, as state expenditures on public education have also withered (Leachman & Mai, 2014; Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014), threatening the destabilization of public education, investors have flocked towards privatization schemes with government support (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). As such, it seems policy makers and their corporate supporters have become much more concerned with profits than the social good of education, and why not? It is not as if the greatest portion of the next generation of workers will need to fill high skilled positions in the United States (Autor, 2010; Carnevale et al., 2013).

State Education Expenditures

While one might underscore that public education is more the responsibility of states than the federal government, states on average provide only 46% of their education budgets (Leachman & Mai, 2014). Other funding is derived from federal allotments and significantly from local property taxes, which vary. However, state allocations for public education have declined considerably in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Leachman & Mai, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014). According to Leachman and Mai (2014), while most states raised K-12 education spending for the 2014-2015 fiscal year, state K-12 education expenditures remain insufficient to recapture the level of prerecession spending. In fact 14 states still experience a shortfall of greater than 10 percent for 2014-2014 (Leachman & Mai, 2014).

The situation with regards to public higher education is worse. Since the Great Recession, states on average have reduced public higher education per pupil allocations to institutions by 23% (Mitchell et al., 2014). While this percentage is distressing, it includes an over seven percent average restoration in funds since 2013-2014 (Mitchell et al., 2014). Yet, Newfield (2008) also discussed dwindling state allocations to public higher education in the last decades of the twentieth century, prompting institutions to search for private funding sources.

Charters

Yet, as government allocations for public education have declined and the most affluent enjoy relatively low taxes (Piketty, 2014), some wealthy individuals have also chosen to invest in the plunder of public education. For at the same time state funding for education has been decreasing, investors, through the mechanism of charter schools, have swarmed in to capture funds that the government has typically allocated to public schools (Green, Baker, & Oluwole, 2014; Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2010, 2014; Underwood & Mead, 2012; Watkins, 2012). That is, charter ventures have been siphoning away money from struggling public schools.

Though charters currently only capture a small percentage of the K-12 population, five percent for 2012-2013, proponents are charter school expansion are relentless (Ravitch, 2014).

Moreover, many charters are for profit in nature (Levine & Levine, 2014). Additionally, though a sizeable percentage of charter schools are classified as non-profits, 68% in 2012-2013, the boards of many of these schools contract with for profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs), which charge heftily for their services (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). Indeed, contracts for EMOs typically ensure them “between 10% and 20% of a school’s annual revenue” (Levine & Levine, 2014, p. 379), though the percentage can be much higher, with CEOs of chains earning hundreds of thousands of dollars, while decreasing actual funds spent on pupils and teacher compensation (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). Yet in return, charter schools, touted as offering choice to parents, have produced mixed academic results, with some producing deplorable outcomes, despite the flexibility of choosing their students (Ravitch, 2010, 2014). Though, perhaps, bearing similarity to a parasite, charter ventures to include charter schools and EMOs are gaining momentum in their expansion, courtesy of powerful supporters (Barkan, 2010; Ravitch, 2010, 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Underwood & Mead, 2013).

While it is true charter schools are popular with neoconservatives and authoritarian populists (Apple, 2006), they are also a popular venture for entrepreneurs and an array of investors (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). As charter schools receive tax revenue like traditional public schools and are apt to attract private investment, they are a lucrative business (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). Charters are also a profitable enterprise for EMOs, ventures that receive funds from public charters for management services. Further, charter school investors include bond holders, even foreign investors, and underwriters. That is, non-profit charter schools are public entities, operating with state charters, and may issue tax-free bonds to investors (Levine & Levine, 2014). Clearly, this is a major mechanism through which charters generate capital, as investors earn tax free returns, but it is not the only one.

Though investors may buy charter bonds, typically from underwriters, who assume the risk of the bond and resell it to investors for a profit, tax credits also make charter schools a gainful investment (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). For investors may also take advantage of the New Markets Tax Credit, part of the Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000, which Congress has consistently reauthorized (Ravitch, 2014; Strauss, 2014). Investors of businesses in economically struggling areas or regions with considerable poverty may qualify, as long as the enterprise in which they invest creates jobs (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014; Strauss, 2014). Thus, charter investors may participate. As such, investors in equity ventures, such as stocks and loans, gain a 39% return of their original investment in tax credits over a seven year period, and investors may also sell their tax returns (Levine & Levine, 2014). Certainly, this tax credit incentivizes charter school investment.

Moreover, there are other reasons why wealthy individuals support charter schools. There are profits to be had in real estate, as well as green cards for sale (Levine & Levine, 2014; Ravitch, 2014; Strauss, 2014). As, David Brain, head of Entertainment Properties Trust stated, leasing space to charters is ‘a very stable business, very recession resistant . . . a very high-demand product . . . [I]f you do business with states with solid treasuries, then it’s a very solid business’ (as cited in Ravitch, 2014, p. 161). Furthermore, a portion of a 1990 Federal immigration law, known as Eb-5, enables foreigners to obtain permanent residency in the U.S. for themselves and immediate family, provided they invest “$1 million in an American enterprise, or $500,000 if the enterprise is in a rural or high unemployment area” (Levine & Levine, 2014, p. 385).

Also, while Ravitch (2010, 2014) discussed considerable corruption surrounding charter schools, it is apparent that legislation embraces charter schools as a treasure chest of gold, silver, and gems in various mints and colors. That is, powerful foundations have been converging to support these ventures (Ravitch 2010, 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014), and while calling themselves philanthropic, profit is surely a motive. Also, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), composed of “some two thousand state legislators and business leaders, promotes privatization and corporate interests” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 162) through legislation undermining public schools from teacher evaluation and certification to funding and usurping control of school districts (Underwood & Mead, 2012; Ravitch, 2014). Thus, as investors amass greater fortunes, public schools and their employees find themselves greatly reduced in security (Medina, 2014; Ravitch 2010, 2014). Perhaps it is worth again noting that Piketty (2014) perceived the U.S. in particular as returning to a “rentier” society, where quality of life is to be derived from capital, not comfortable wages or even living wages.

As for students, neoliberal policies of the last few decades have had grim consequences. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT), policies driven by private interest (Ravitch, 2010, 2014; Saltman, 2012; Watkins, 2012), have closed neighborhood schools failing to achieve unrealistic achievement growth based on mathematical modeling. As Ravitch (2010) described, charters backed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation moved into New York City, skimmed the best students from the public schools, and hastened the closing of public schools in poor neighborhoods as the schools increasingly underperformed. Furthermore, as Ravitch (2010) described, the “troublesome students,” not wanted by charters, “were relegated to another large high school, where their enrollment instigated a spiral of failure, dissolution, and closing. The DOE set in motion a process that acted like a computer virus in the large high schools” (p.84). As this example illustrates, the neoliberal agenda for charter schools has been harmful to underperforming students in poor urban areas. It is as if neoliberal reformers, even those that toot their philanthropy, care naught for our nation’s disadvantaged children.

Without Empathy

Indeed, Giroux (2014) alleges the elite do not care because “economic Darwinism leaves no room for compassion or ethical considerations . . . (p. 15). That is, pupils are reduced to merely future capital in the neoliberal equation. Central to Robertson’s (2007) argument is that the elite have an agenda with three aims: 1) redistribution of wealth to the rich, 2) the production of workers the economy needs, 3) and the death of public education in favor of remaking education a profitable sector of the economy. Perhaps some believe that they can truly better education while profiting off of their reform agendas (Freeland, 2012), but Winfield (2012) also discussed underlying assumptions or "imbedded eugenic ideology" (p. 155) with regards to class and race that are inherent in testing and the overall bullying of underperforming schools.

Perhaps there is something sinister behind neoliberal policies that are callous, even to children. For instance, the world is full of youth in sweat shops, working for non-living wages, as has been the case since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. However, many, still relatively privileged in the West, think little on it, and some do not seem to fully grasp the situation. That is, the suffering is too removed from them. Whatever the case, "We are witness to a profound qualitative reordering of American society, the genesis of which is occurring in American schools . . . what is happening now is about institutionalizing human worth" (Winfield, 2012, p. 157). Ultimately, that policy in the U.S. is shifting away from public education as an imperative social good, underfunding public schools and opening them up to entrepreneurial schemes, perhaps signals that powerful interests have no important plans for much of the next generation.

Higher Education

While the Bush and Obama administrations have been complicit in the demolition of K-12 public education (Ravitch, 2010, 2014), it seems that the Obama administration has been formulating a plan that could potentially harm higher education institutions and students. That is, the plan has been met with mixed opinions at the institutional level (Anderson, 2014; Fain, 2013; Shear, 2014), as college and university administrations have expressed particular concern for the plan's proposal to tie student financial aid to college ratings based on factors, such as affordability, graduation rates, employment success of graduates, and, of course, number of students receiving the Pell Grant (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). As a result, students attending lower rated institutions would receive less financial aid than students attending schools with higher ratings (Espinosa, Crandall, & Tukibaya, 2014), and institutions enrolling students from less affluent backgrounds would likely be the most penalized by the plan's funding scheme (Espinosa et al., 2014). Thus, while the plan ironically purports to expand access to higher education, it stands to potentially threaten some institutions and students, particularly as lower income pupils are most dependent on financial aid packages, and the rating system influences institutions to become more selective (Espinosa, et al., 2014). Indeed, it appears the rating system will serve the purpose of class reproduction rather than accessibility.

Moreover, Obama's plan potentially threatens faculty positions, if institutions cannot efficiently juggle the demands of the federal program. While some institutions have weathered declining funding by increasing tuition, the rating system would discourage that decision (The White

House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). Also, the plan calls for incentives to colleges and universities that develop innovative programs that “work,” such as the greater use of Massive Open On-line Courses (MOOCs) that also potentially threaten faculty positions (Rhoads, Berdan, & Toven-Lindsey, 2013). However, the full plan awaits implementation until the administration has established the other portions of the program. That is, the President will not petition Congress to permit tying funding to ratings until 2018 (The Whitehouse, Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). Ultimately, some features of the White House plan appear to be oppressive to lower and middle income students, as well as institutional employees.

Yet, while this policy towards higher education institutions appears nebulously ominous, there is an additional federal proposal that would punish colleges of education for underperforming test scores, not of their students, but of their students’ K-12 pupils (Kumashiro, 2014). Consequences include loss of accreditation and loss of student financial aid, making it difficult for teacher preparation programs to operate (Kumashiro, 2014). Therefore, the aims of this proposed program are clearer, as they are a striking compliment to neoliberal reforms already in place for K-12.

Conclusion

As Sloterdijk (2009) noted, it was the duty of the statesman “to understand how to bring together free but suggestible people in order to bring out the characteristics that are most advantageous to the whole, so that under his direction the human zoo can achieve the optimum homeostasis” (p. 26). However, neoliberalism’s aim of unbridled redistributive wealth is destabilizing, as previously discussed. At the same time it is also worth noting that individuals within the U.S. have faced increasing surveillance (Giroux, 2014; Savage & Apuzzo, 2014) to include wiretapping and monitoring of social media for dissent against government policies (Freeburn, 2014; Savage & Apuzzo, 2014; Washington Blog, 2012). As, McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) and Zizek (2009) have suggested, this really looks like corporate fascism.

Also, as I ponder where neoliberalism and its influence will end, I cannot help but to think of science fiction. Most immediately I conjure an image from the film, Looper (Bergman, Stern, & Johnson, 2012) in which the main character, driving a new sports car in striking juxtaposition to the slums of the street he is barreling down, almost hits a child. While reminiscent A Tale of Two Cities (Dickens, 1859/1998), this scene portrays the future of U.S. cities. Unfortunately, there is all the reason to consider the scene an accurate depiction of circumstances if the current economic course is sustained. As I have described, it appears that the quality of life for multitudes in the West (particularly in the U.S.) is in decline because the elite have orchestrated this reality to enrich themselves, as Robertson (2007) proposed. Per my earlier discussion, Watkins (2012) suggested that scores of workers are no longer of as much worth to powerful entities in what Bauman (2007) suggested is an out of control, neoliberal, and oppressive global system in which employees can depend on nothing, a point also noted by Reich (2015). Even many college graduates are scathed, as there has been a hollowing out of the middle class (Abel et al., 2014; Aronowitz, 2001; Autor, 2010; Longworth, 1998; Reich, 2015).

Moreover, I suggest that neoliberal policy makers in the U.S. perceive little importance in public education beyond as a profitable vehicle for investors because corporations do not intend on employing many of the next generation as high or even medium skill labor. Again, as Autor (2010) described, only about a third of the population is needed for highly skilled labor, while middle skill labor is being automated.

Indeed, after centuries of capitalism plundering the third world, neoliberalism has also been unleashing the negative effects of capitalism on Western nations in recent decades. That is, as Freeland (2012) and Zizek (2009) explained, a plutocracy has ascended to global mastery. They live everywhere. They are a distinct group, and they no longer possess allegiance to a particular nation. These are lords, and the rest are the peasants – the underclass is growing. Bauman (2007) underscored an even greater significance in this. That is:

> “Being out of a job implies being disposable . . . only a thin line today separates the unemployed, and especially the long-term unemployed, from a fall into the black hole of the ‘underclass’ . . . [and] no less tenuous is the line separating the ‘redundant’ from the criminals . . .”(p.70)

In other words Bauman (2007) warned of a major decline in political rights to follow. That is, perhaps Rifkin (2014) was overly optimistic as to where the spiral of capitalism will lead, as he believed the result will be a collaborative commons of innovation. However, there are alternative perspectives, and certainly Wolfe (2013) reminded readers of the power of discursive shifts – how they are “readily available for deployment against *whatever* body happens to fall outside the ethnocentric ‘we’” (p. 21). In the film *Elysium* (Block, Kingberg, & Blomkamp, 2013) the wealthy have left Earth for another world paradise, while those who remain, those who are valued below robots, fight for crumbs to survive on a barren planet. Perhaps this is the probable future.

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