

Neoliberalism and the Politics of Disposability: Education, Urbanization, and Displacement in the New Chicago

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between neoliberalism and school restructuring in Chicago. I provide an account of the ideological foundation of neoliberal education policies as well as an account of their development and implementation in the city. Additionally, I analyze Chicago's newest education agenda, Renaissance 2010. Passed into law in 2004, the policy is a continuation of previous Chicago school reforms and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), but, as I will argue, it is also representative of an emerging urbanism defined by uneven economic development and public abandonment. The policy has been implicated in clearing the ground for corporate development through privatization and school closures, while undermining educational quality, just distributions of resources, and the democratic participation of communities. As such, I contend that Renaissance 2010 represents a policy commensurate with what Henry Giroux has referred to as a "politics of disposability". It is a politics where the imperatives of the market come at the expense of public life, democracy, and responsibility toward the future (Giroux, 2006).

Introduction

Chicago has often found itself at the center of contentious political struggles in the United States. Confrontations over labor rights, racial justice, and gender equality have been defining features of the city's history. One need only mention Haymarket, Fred Hampton, or the protests of 1968 to evoke both Chicago's activist past as well as its deeply corrupt and heavy handed institutional politics. Battles over education have shared this legacy. The city has been home to some of the most influential and

devoted activists in progressive education. In the early 20th century Francis Parker, Jane Adams, and John Dewey, among others, were instrumental in stirring national debates over the centrality of public education in the promotion of social justice, public culture, and democracy. They argued that in a democracy, public education was central for nurturing civic values and for cultivating the creative potential of all citizens. Today in Chicago, education has once again become a frontline political issue as commercial interests threaten to thoroughly colonize the structure and democratic function of public schools.

Since the 1990's, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have undergone a series of radical institutional reforms. The restructuring of the CPS has followed a neoliberal agenda for urban development, and has corresponded closely to the larger economic transition of Chicago in recent decades. In much of the rhetoric circulated by Mayor Daley's office and Chicago's business community, the CPS has been painted as an anachronistic system that is "inefficient" and "corrupt" and thus incapable of providing the kind of educational innovation necessary to serve the demands of the global economy (Civic Committee, 2003). It has been suggested that the families and students of Chicago's schools suffer from lack of incentive due to low standards and the absence of competition. In 1995, Chicago instituted a series of controversial education reforms, designed to integrate school privatization, choice, and accountability into public education in order to ostensibly "fix" these systemic problems. These policies have sought to radically transform the CPS by instituting measures that have allowed for greater top-down control over education, while integrating the market into the structure and operation of schools.

Broadly speaking, the reform agenda which began with the 1995 reforms and is being carried on today through the Renaissance 2010 plan, can be described as a neoliberal vision for education in the city. This vision is folded into a particular way of seeing and conceptualizing the development and implementation of technologies and processes on a variety of scales. In the case of public education, this vision has worked toward creating a competitive market driven system based on privatization schemes and a test driven instrumental curriculum. Much of the discourse surrounding these bold initiatives paints them as broad egalitarian and democratic steps for "fixing" a "broken" and "corrupt" system incapable of preparing youth for the

challenges of Chicago's post-industrial future (Johnson, 1998; Civic Committee, 2003). However, while the discourse surrounding Chicago school policy makes claims to delivering a more efficient and higher quality of education for all students, in practice, school reforms are increasingly complicit in exacerbating already glaring inequalities in the CPS. In a school district of 400,000 students, where 88% are students of color and 85% live below the federal poverty line, the record over the past several decades reveals an appalling disinvestment in the CPS [1]. Instead of working to strengthen public schools and to invest in the future of these students, the Mayor's office and Chicago's corporate policy elite have aggressively campaigned to enforce cost-cutting, market-driven privatization and accountability policies. Not only have these policies failed to deliver on their educational promises - test scores and drop-out rates have yet to improve - they have become complicit in forwarding a corporate agenda for the city at the expense of Chicago's poorest communities.

In what follows, I analyze the relationship between neoliberalism and public education in order to provide context for school restructuring in Chicago. I discuss how market rationalities and shifts in political economy have emboldened a neoliberal agenda for education based on privatization, disciplinary managerialism, and high stakes tests. I provide an account of the ideological foundation of these policies as well as an account of their development and implementation in Chicago. Additionally, I analyze Chicago's newest education agenda, Renaissance 2010. Passed into law in 2004, the policy is a continuation of previous Chicago school reforms and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), but, as I will argue, it is also representative of an emerging urbanism defined by uneven economic development and public abandonment. The policy has been implicated in clearing the ground for corporate development through privatization and school closures while undermining educational quality, just distributions of resources, and the democratic participation of communities. As such, I contend that Renaissance 2010 represents a policy commensurate with what Henry Giroux has referred to as a "politics of disposability". It is a politics where the imperatives of the market come at the expense of public life, democracy, and responsibility toward the future (Giroux, 2006).

Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Public Education

The origins of neoliberalism and its defining material and ideological characteristics have been well charted. Advanced by theorists like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Von Hayek of the so-called “Chicago School” of economics, neoliberalism, or, advanced liberalism (Rose, 1996), emerged as an academic counter-discourse to Keynesianism in the post-war period. Originally viewed as a marginal or idiosyncratic economic theory, it first began gaining traction with policy makers during the stagflation, oil shocks, and cultural backlashes of the 1970’s. Subsequently, it was to become the dominant ideological force of economic and social policy under Reagan and Thatcher, and its tenets have since achieved wide consensus as the only “natural” and “rational” way of managing the new technologically, demographically, and environmentally changing world (Harvey, 2003 2005).

Despite deriving its legitimacy from appeals to progress and democracy, neoliberalism has been implicated in a variety of anti-democratic policies and practices throughout the world. On the structural level, neoliberalism calls for the deregulation and privatization of public systems and the dismantling of trade and tax barriers in order to maximize the global mobility of capital. This has entailed public disinvestment in favor of corporate subsidies, direct involvement in policy by corporations, privatization initiatives, and the aggressive roll back of labor and civil protections. Moreover, it has empowered international trade and financial institutions like the WTO and the IMF to overhaul regional and national economies in order to advance transnational corporate interests over and against the interests of economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

On the socio-political level, neoliberalism might best be understood as a set of interrelated, yet contradictory rationalities, which seek to limit government involvement in the public domain, and to expose social structures to competitive pressures. This means that neoliberalism is a kind of endless critique of government, claiming that the government that governs best is the government which governs least (Dean, 1999, 2007) [2]. It is rooted in a conception of negative freedom which favors the elimination of all restrictions on buying and selling, and the shifting of risk, responsibility, and security away from the public and onto the shoulders of individuals

in a competitive market (Freidman, 2002). It follows that neoliberals privilege the market mechanism as the most “efficient” and “rational” tool for constructing human agency as well as for determining social and political organization.[3] They argue for eliminating, and, or, deregulating governmental and public structures, while embedding exchange relations within the social fabric.

While neoliberalism is rooted in an ethos of limited government it has systematically relied upon state power to implement free market policies. This has led to the aggressive manufacture of markets where previously none have existed through the reworking and privatization of public systems like education, health care, and social insurance within a deregulated economy. It follows that social capital is increasingly directed away from public commitments and toward the private domain. As a result, new modes of subjectivity and citizenship are forged through a social mandate to provide for one’s security solely through individual ‘choice’. This means that neoliberalism works to build a socio-political universe of infinite and endless commercial transactions, where responsibility becomes increasingly a matter of private accountability as opposed to the collective good (Lemke, 2002). This is visible in the proliferation of activities and cultural phenomena which focus the self on self: the careful calculation and accounting of calories, finances, test scores, and reps at the gym; the tremendous success in self-help and get rich quick schlock embodied by *The Secret* [4]; and the ubiquitous gaze of infotainment and media spectacle.

In the United States, neoliberal theories have had a significant influence over the direction of educational policy. Since the early 1980s corporate advocates and policy makers have worked aggressively to integrate the market into public education (Apple, 1996). This has meant a general disinvestment in public schools - especially the most historically neglected and racially segregated - in favor of school privatization initiatives designed to create school systems of ‘choice’, where parents ‘shop’ for schools in a competitive marketplace (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Gewirtz, 1995; Apple, 2006). This has led to the erosion of public schools and the development of charter schools, voucher schemes, and for-profit schools, effectively allowing corporations to take over large sectors of public education systems throughout the United States. This has coincided with union busting, the imposition of a narrowed

and scripted curriculum, the de-skilling of teachers, and the operation of schools under a corporate managerial structure, at times directly for profit.

Market reformers claim that these measures will spur innovation, reduce costs, and raise the quality of education through the natural efficiencies of the market [5]. The Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is a case in point [6]. It is built on an ethos of deregulation and competition, where privatization, corporate managerialism, cost-cutting, standardized curricula, and the erosion of teacher autonomy and collective bargaining rights, are thought to streamline the educational process and equip students with the basic skills necessary to compete in the new flexible labor market (Hursh, 2001; Lipman, 2001). In addition, the NCLB mandates that public schools embrace a curriculum focused on high stakes testing which under the threat of severe penalization, requires teachers to "skill and drill" students for tests. Failure to make the grade on standardized tests can mean losses in funding to schools, harsh remediation measures, and even the threat of being labeled a "failure" and closed permanently. This kind of discipline is thought to produce the incentive struggling schools need to raise their performance - measured exclusively through a nation-wide regime of high stakes tests – while empowering educational companies and eroding public control over education (Ibid).

Whereas public schools operate to serve the common good and are subject to public oversight, privately run charter, contract, and for-profit schools, lack public accountability, are often hostile to unions, favor standardized curriculum, and operate under a commercial value structure that is often at odds with democratic values and notions of civic responsibility (Saltman, 2005 2007). Privatization and choice initiatives create a situation where schools are forced to compete with each other over resources, and families are left to obtain the best services they can in a fundamentally unequal and stratified school system. In the spirit of competition and deregulation, these policies have worked to shift the burden of educational responsibility from collective commitments onto the shoulders of individual communities. These regimes, in turn, govern through both this shifting of responsibility as well as through concrete modes of discipline directed at schools, teachers, and students (Ibid).

Instead of working toward greater equity in the school system, the drive toward privatization, choice, and accountability works from the neoliberal discourse that inequality is natural and healthy, impelling competition, and therefore, innovation and change. According to neoliberal education reform advocates like former IBM chairman Louis Gerstner, this works to reconfigure students in terms “human capital”: as autonomous consumers in a system of competitive services where education is understood as a mechanism for job training and social discipline (Gerstner, 1994). Moreover, as the burden of responsibility for educational opportunity shifts from the state to individual choice within a marketplace, the highly unequal way schools are funded (based on local tax bases) becomes legitimated. Inequitable schooling then becomes a symbol of the supposed incompetence and irresponsibility of localities rather than the absence of resources and social investment.

While neoliberal school reforms are couched in the language of universality and democracy it has been well documented that performance benchmarks and standardized curriculum are mainly enforced in struggling schools in poor communities where working class kids of color are viewed as lacking discipline and control (Kozol, 2006). Here, the neoliberal emphasis on standardized curriculum and testing can be read as “technologies of control” in a Foucauldian sense [7], intrinsically limiting the ability of students and teachers to contextualize and map their position within the relationships of power they are engaged. They regulate both faculty and student bodies within normative systems of surveillance and punishment that attempt to confine pedagogy within a narrow and instrumental curriculum (Ball, 1994; Foucault, 1995). This demonstrates contempt for both teachers and students where low-income communities of color are prescribed curricular discipline – cloaked as efficiency and universality - at the expense of meaningful pedagogy and financial and social equity. As public school teacher Claudia Ayers has put it

Gone are the days of true engagement, when emerging goals included such things as integrated- and systems-learning, concept development and global citizenship. Other things being left behind: field trips, democracy in action, age-appropriate curriculum [everything is hurried], project choices, recess, problem solving, team building, discussion, teachable moments, student-taught lessons, inquiry, discovery, inductive thought, art, music, teachers teaching to their strengths, freedom, or even ... joy. No wonder kids are dropping out in record numbers. The kinds of things that lead to wisdom and ideals are steadily being

eradicated, and if the people who should know better don't start standing up, valued public education will, simply, be irrevocably lost (Ayers).

Education Reform in the New Chicago

Since the 1970's, neoliberal rationalities have played a significant role in reshaping the economic, cultural, and political fabric of Chicago. The city's policies reflect its transition from an industrial hub to a service and knowledge-based economy facilitated by a greater centralization of authority in the Mayor's office and the corporate sector. With its industrial base in decline, the city has embarked on an intensive drive to become what has been referred to as a "global city", or, "world city". Saskia Sassen defines global cities as "command points" for capital and labor in an emerging economy increasingly predicated on finance, information, and the global mobility of production networks (Sassen, 2006). Global cities then, are post-industrial cities that have taken on prominent roles in the control over regional and national economic processes, thus affording them greater economic influence on a global scale.

The Daley administration has strategically worked to make the city a competitive force in the world economy and to market the city as an attractive site for the international investment of capital as well as a desirable home for corporate offices and workers (Lipman and Hursh, 2007; Lipman and Haines, 2007). It has done so through organizations like World Business Chicago, a non-profit firm chaired by Mayor Richard Daley, committed to "marketing Chicago's competitive advantages, coordinate business retention and attraction efforts, and to enhance Chicago's business friendly climate" (WBC). In many respects, Chicago has emerged as a strategic site for the distribution and flow of information and capital on a global scale. It is home to dozens of powerful transnational corporations and with the recent merger of the Chicago Board of Trade and the Mercantile Exchange, it has become the site of the largest securities exchange in the world, with 4.2 trillion dollars flowing through the system daily (Yager).

The development of these financial capacities has coincided with the expanded production of uneven economic growth and development in the city. As Chicago's

elite have strategically worked to make the city a competitive player within international markets, its social policy has dramatically shifted toward privatization and public disinvestment. On one hand, its post-industrial era has been defined by an incredible downtown proximate economic expansion visible in the proliferation of high-end corporate development in offices, retail, arts and entertainment complexes, and upscale housing. On the other hand, these mostly white middle-class, professional, and tourist zones, are surrounded by some of the most segregated, neglected, and heavily policed ghettos [8] in the world (D'Eramo, 2002).

While Chicago's economy has shifted toward finance and information services, economic inequalities have expanded in the city, with the poor and middle classes losing substantial ground to upper income professionals. John Koval has described this as an "hourglass" economy defined by class ossification and an employment structure which increasingly rewards those at the top, while inhibiting advancement and economic security for those at the bottom. Most strikingly, this division has become increasingly predicated on race and ethnicity with expanding gaps in wealth and privilege becoming ever more clearly demarcated by the color line (Koval, 2006). According to a recent report put out by the Heartland Alliance [9], poverty rates have increased steadily in Chicago since 1999, today, 573,486 people now live in poverty in Chicago, and 90% of those are people of color. The report claims that while access to good paying jobs has declined almost 22.5% since the year 2000, costs have soared for housing and transportation, thus making it more and more difficult for families to meet their basic needs. In addition, fallout from the sub-prime mortgage fiasco has contributed to an 858% increase in home foreclosures in Chicago over the last ten years, adding to further dislocations and economic stratification (Illinois Poverty Summary, 2007).

The restructuring of the city's public school system is representative of these shifting economic and political dynamics in Chicago. Over the last several decades Chicago's business community has come to play an ever larger role in the decisions effecting school policy in the city. In the interest of promoting a neoliberal agenda for education in the city, the corporate elite have claimed that systemic and curricular restructuring must focus on making schools and students more competitive and responsive to the flexible demands of the new economy. According to Metropolis

2020, a business plan for Chicago schools, the CPS must be equipped to prepare “employees, who can, at minimum, read instruction manuals, do basic math and communicate well” (Johnson, 1998). The plan warns that without fundamental school restructuring, the Chicago region may face both difficulties in attracting and retaining global corporate headquarters and investment, as well as the professionals and families that go along with it. In what follows, I would like to provide an account of how school policy in the city has incrementally been shifted away from the public and into the hands of the Mayor and the city’s corporate elite.

During the 1980’s anxieties over shifting workforce demands and deindustrialization moved education front and center on the political agenda of the United States. In 1988, on the heels of the conservative education manifesto, *A Nation at Risk* - which derided public education and promoted market based reforms - Chicago passed a landmark legislative compromise that empowered Mayor Daley and a corporate board called the “School Finance Authority” while appeasing community activists with a greater voice in education at the neighborhood level (Lipman and Hursh, 2007; Lipman and Haines, 2007). At the administrative level this meant greater corporate influence in public policy and a consolidation of the Mayor’s power over the education system, or, what is known as the “mayoral control” model, a Chicago innovation that has rapidly spread to other major American cities. On the local level this meant the establishment of Local School Councils (LSC’s) made up of teachers, parents, and students who came together to make important decisions about the operation and direction of their schools. (Ibid)

The LSC’s were a positive step toward instituting a more democratic process for shaping education in the city and were the fruits of broad based grass roots educational activism. While imperfect, the LSC’s served as a platform for community involvement in the decision making process of public schools. However, the Daley administration has shown little regard for the LSC’s – slowly eroding their role – and has relentlessly worked to consolidate his power and to integrate the market into public governance.

Daley has followed an unwavering and unapologetic neoliberal agenda aimed at privatization, claiming that it “recasts government as more of an overseer than a

producer” and helps “reduce public cynicism” about efficiency and effectiveness by shrinking the public sector (Ships, 2006, p.135). His record on privatization has earned him the tongue in cheek moniker “a great Republican Mayor” and his zest for making Chicago “a great place to do business” has largely managed to stifle democratic participation rather than to expand it (Ibid). Additionally, it is questionable if public cynicism has receded. During his 18 year administration Daley has contracted out countless public services to private companies and maneuvered to abrogate the power of unions while overseeing a regime that has been embroiled in endless scandals involving bribery, fraud, organized crime, police brutality, and shameless cronyism (Street, 2007).

The centralization of authority in 1988 allowed for bolder moves in education policy during the following decade. In 1995, Chicago passed sweeping legislation designed to open the school system up to the competitive pressures of the market while further enhancing the power of Mayor Daley and his corporate partners. The 1995 reforms granted Daley increased oversight over educational affairs. It granted him the right to hire and fire the members of the Board of Education’s Executive Committee while shrinking the overall size and power of the Board of Education (Lipman & Hursh, 2007). Additionally, the reform created a Chief Executive Officer for the Chicago Public Schools. Daley reserved the power to appoint the CEO who became the unquestioned authority over the districts 600 principals whose mandate was to implement the curricular and structural directives of the Daley administration. This included the use of mandatory district created lesson plans, almost 10,000 total, aimed directly at teaching basic skills for tests (Ships, 2006). Additionally, this reform gave principals, repositioned as “managers” and “directors”, new powers over the dismissal of teachers as well as implemented a series of initiatives designed to curb the power of the teachers union. The law also gave the mayor and his team the right to punish underperforming schools with “probation” “remediation”, and “reconstitution” if necessary (Ibid). Daley hand-picked the state budget director Paul Vallas to be the new schools CEO. Vallas rapidly followed a neoliberal prescription by dismantling and privatizing CPS infrastructure while relentlessly campaigning to break the teacher’s union. His zeal led Fortune magazine to give him the complimentary nickname “Chain Saw Paul” for his “tough tactics” and Newsweek Magazine praised his single minded devotion to “as little democracy as possible” (Ibid, p. 157). Mayor

Daley made it clear that the 1995 reforms signaled that Chicago was now officially “in the business of education” (Ibid).

At their inception, with the help of an uncritical media, the 1995 policies were met with broad based support. The reforms appealed to ‘common sense’ by stressing that greater competition and discipline could help fix the school system’s problems which were blamed on the “inefficiencies” and “corruption” of the public sector.

Communities, by and large, welcomed the seemingly rigorous and egalitarian promise of universal standards and the flexibility to ‘shop’ for schools. But the reforms have failed to live up to their promises. The idea of granting parents greater flexibility in a “school marketplace” has resulted in the empowerment of families who are already most likely to have the cultural capital to effectively navigate the systemic channels necessary to acquire the best resources while “punishing those who are least likely to have the resources necessary to obtain the goods and services that they most need” (Pattillo, p. 151). Moreover, since 1995, high-stakes testing has done little to alleviate systemic inequality or improve the overall level of student achievement as measured by the mandates. Drop-out rates for CPS remain hovering around 45%, schools are still starving for funds and resources, teacher turnover is atrocious with most new teachers leaving the profession within three years, class sizes average around 30 kids per class, and test scores still lag far behind benchmarks and goals (CPS Web). This has led to charges of “back door” privatization. Under the 1995 reforms, and nationally codified by the NCLB, schools who fail to meet testing goals are stripped of their already meager federal funding, and if performance does not improve, can be ordered to close only to be ‘flipped’, or, reopened as privately run schools. This has opened the way for private education companies to swoop in and sell their remediation services - on the public dime no less - as well as the rights to open additional charter and private contract schools (Saltman, 2005 2007).

Renaissance 2010, passed into law in 2004, is a continuation of the neoliberal direction instituted by the 1995 reforms and the NCLB, but it represents a new ideological and structural synergy of corporate power and its shifting priorities in the city. The plan was developed by Mayor Daley in conjunction with the Commercial Club of Chicago. Comprised of some of the city’s most powerful financial elites, the

Commercial Club has long been active in public policy debates in the city. Renaissance 2010 has been designed by the Commercial Club and their Civic Committee to complement and forward a school privatization agenda which breaks up the LSC's, weakens the teacher's union, cuts costs, and works in the general service of corporate interests (Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Lipman and Haines, 2007). The policy mandates the closing of 60 Chicago area public schools in predominantly low-income African American communities and the opening of 100 new schools, two-thirds of which will consist of privately run charter and contract schools, as well as new deregulated public schools. These private schools are designed to be lean and efficient by operating outside the rules and budgetary constraints governing public schools. The new schools further reduce operating expenses by lowering wages for teachers and auxiliary employees, favoring assimilation over bilingual education, providing less money per pupil, and by recruiting and hiring less experienced first and second year teachers to further reduce payroll. Teachers in these schools are not allowed to unionize, are required to negotiate their salaries and benefits individually, can be fired at any time and for any reason (Ibid).

Renaissance 2010, Displacement, and the Politics of Disposability

While the proponents of Renaissance 2010 make claims that it works to improve educational quality and to produce self-starting agents fit for the global economy, in practice, the policy is increasingly implicated in a neoliberal agenda for corporate expansion and development. The policy is couched in the language of 'universality' and 'progress', but has been implicated in expanding inequalities, as public assets are seized and distributed to private interests. As opposed to notions of 'renewal' or 'progress' defined by democratic supports for community involvement, and infrastructure development for employment and social provision, the notion of 'renewal' and 'progress' embodied by Renaissance 2010, is rooted in terms of corporate progress, privatization, and unrestrained economic growth (Arrastia, 2007). Renaissance 2010 is not only about cutting costs, breaking unions, and producing docile bodies for the labor market; it is also acting as a lever for the expansion of capital accumulation through the displacement of low-income communities and the seizure of public assets. As such, Renaissance 2010 fits within what David Harvey referred to as "accumulation by dispossession": the privatization and

commercialization of untapped or non-profit generating sectors of the spatial and cultural geography (Harvey, 2003 2005).

Harvey argues that in the age of multi-national capitalism “accumulation by dispossession” exists as both a regressive strategy of accumulation as well as novel practices that utilize new technologies and processes to tap into public goods and resources including systems like education, social insurance, health care, and public transportation (Ibid). He has documented that as new forms of accumulation transfer public assets to corporations and distribute wealth upwards, the political and cultural field has become increasingly defined by expanding inequalities, decline, and social abandonment. This is visible in the erosion of public infrastructure, the degradation of schools, runaway debts, ecological destruction, the bursting of speculative bubbles in technology and housing, as well as a stagnation in low-income and middle class wages, while corporate executives and CEO’s have reaped massive increases in salaries and other forms of compensation. Therefore, “accumulation by dispossession” is descriptive of the reformulation and organization of society within the rules and values of an unsustainable endless-growth political economy (Ibid).

Neil Smith has argued that these processes have produced a new regressive urbanism. For cities like Chicago, the move from an industrial economy to a global service and information economy has meant a general curtailment of investments in the social sphere in favor of privatization, or, what Smith argues is a general disinvestment in the channels of social reproduction and an abandonment of the poor (Smith, 2002). Smith argues that this has produced an urban sociality marked by new forms of economic redundancy and the de-politicization and criminalization of the urban poor [10]. According to Smith

communications and financial deregulation have expanded the geographical mobility of capital; unprecedented labor migrations have distanced local economies from automatic dependency on home grown labor; national and local states (including city governments) have responded by offering carrots to capital while applying the stick to labor and dismantling previous supports for social reproduction; and finally, class and race based struggles have broadly receded, giving local and national governments increased leeway to abandon that sector of the population surplus by both the restructuring of the economy and the gutting of social services. The mass incarceration of working class and minority

populations, especially in the US, is the national analogue of the emerging revanchist city. (Ibid, 2002, p. 433, my emphasis)

Smith claims that the neoliberal restructuring of cities has led to the return of what he calls the “revanchist” city. Based on the French city of the 19th century where the Parisian elite demonized the working classes, the new “revanchist” city is defined by the coarsening of attitudes toward the poor and the abandonment of the those populations unable to find a toehold in the new economy (Smith, 1996). Additionally, legal and juridical channels have reinterpreted and crafted legislation that provides maximum flexibility for capital while expunging the role of government in ensuring basic civil protections. This has led to a grotesque expansion in law enforcement and mass incarceration in order to regulate and control the urban poor. Therefore, the new revanchism is descriptive of divided cities of wealth and poverty, but, it is marked as much by the coercive and anti-democratic processes which produce and maintain this division, as it is by inequality. In this context, the new revanchism is a metaphor for the “ugly cultural politics of neoliberal globalization” (Macleod, p. 260).

Privatization policies like Renaissance 2010 have gained traction by seizing on and exploiting “revanchist” imagery of urban danger and decay. Racially coded narratives of urban deviance have contributed to broad based support for regressive policies that are thought to bring order and “civilization” back to the city through get-tough on crime policies, gentrification strategies, and the further curtailment of services and investments in the public sphere. Widespread cultural discourses have worked to conflate notions of the public, the urban, and blackness with notions of corruption and pathology (Giroux, 2003 2004). While erasing a long history of racial exclusion and violence, it is argued that in a post-civil rights era, the market provides a racially neutral and efficient mechanism to ensure order and to distribute prosperity to those most deserving (Goldberg, 2005). This vision of racial politics has worked to effectively relegate low-income populations of color to the trash heap of social conscience.

Henry Giroux has referred to this as the “politics of disposability”. It represents a politics where poor and racially marginalized populations are imagined to offer little value to the world of buying and selling therefore become “collateral damage in the

construction of the neoliberal order” (Giroux, 2006, p. 11). Giroux argues that this “politics of disposability” was revealed most spectacularly through the human tragedy, governmental incompetence, and deeply rooted racism displayed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He contends that Katrina made visible how neoliberal ideologies have elevated individual responsibility and commercialism to a formal doctrine while stripping government and cultural life of any connection to collective responsibility [11]. The result has been the expansion of new forms of economic and social insecurity for millions of people who, by merit of their race and class, are denied access to employment opportunities, health care, quality education, affordable housing, and capable and responsible governance.

Renaissance 2010 represents this “politics of disposability” in several respects. As I have already described, it has eliminated the democratic process from decisions affecting schools by empowering the Mayor, the CEO, and the Commercial Club over communities, teachers, and students. In addition, it enforces a standardized curricular which devalues education while legitimating the abandonment of schools and communities who fail to properly compete in this new test-driven school market. Moreover, it is fueling a school privatization effort by closing schools and turning them into privately run schools, empowering education companies at the expense of the public good. School closings and privatization are also being wielded as levers for capitalizing on low-income communities. Renaissance 2010 is working in concert with public housing demolitions to displace residents from neighborhoods in the interest of gentrification and corporate development projects. The public schools that Renaissance 2010 has targeted are in neighborhoods which have stagnated for years due to lack of investment in infrastructure and living-wage employment opportunities, but have become increasingly lucrative sites for gentrification. In concert with the manipulation of tax dollars and the destruction of public housing, school closures are helping to clear the ground for the reclamation of these spaces. With the real-estate value of their neighborhoods now more valuable than their labor power, these low-income communities of color have effectively been rendered disposable in Chicago’s new service and finance driven economy.

One of the fundamental drivers of economic and educational restructuring has been the re-distribution of funds away from public assets and into the hands of

corporations. On a citywide basis the Daley administration has imposed tax increment financing schemes, or (TIFs), which, counter to their stated aim of channeling money to underserved neighborhoods, have, in many cases, worked to shift money away from poor neighborhoods and toward corporate development projects which work to displace low-income communities. To complete this circular process, money is being extracted directly from public school budgets, which in turn, fuels disinvestment which legitimates the privatization of schools.

Ben Joravsky has written that millions of dollars in public school funding is being siphoned off into Mayoral “slush funds” through TIFs. Through detailed investigative reporting, Joravsky has chronicled how the city has implemented TIFs in the name of urban renewal only to take tax money from the poorest quarters and redistribute it to corporations [12]. This is a racket that has generated hundreds of millions of dollars for new office parks, high-end condo complexes, and other downtown development projects like sports stadiums (Soldier Field renovation \$600 million) and corporately sponsored parks (Millennium Park \$475 million) and corporate headquarters (WBC). In June 2007, the TIF oversight committee ruled that an additional \$65 million dollars’ worth of property taxes should be earmarked for upscale real-estate developments and hand-outs to corporations while the poorest wards receive little more than law-enforcement and fiscal discipline. Joravsky estimates that roughly \$32 million of this total amount is being directly “extracted from the city’s education budget” (Joravsky).

In a city where many public schools are shamefully under-equipped and staffed, losing this money is a slap in the face to the poor, and is indicative of the utter lack of commitment the city has for providing a democratic education to all of its students. And it gets worse, according to Joravsky,

these gargantuan handouts come on the eve of the second-installment property tax bill, which will hike taxes by up to 500 percent in Lawndale, Woodlawn, East Garfield Park, and other poor south- and west-side neighborhoods. Many low-income home owners will face the decision to sell their properties or go into debt to pay their taxes. Their taxes, if they can pay them, will go to fill the vacuum created by the city’s 150 or so TIF’s. Daley and his allies are like reverse Robin Hoods, taking from the poor and giving to the rich (Ibid).

This represents an ambitious strategy to absorb as much capital from low-income neighborhoods as possible before the residents are priced out. A public housing resident claims that “we've always called Mayor Daley Slobodan Milosevic, the same thing is taking place - except its urban and economic cleansing” (Gaus). This “economic cleansing” is creating room for ambitious gentrification projects in the city. The corporate redevelopment of economically hollowed out neighborhoods has become an increasingly large portion of the productive economy of Chicago. Gentrification is being paid for through TIF's and lubricated through school closings and public housing demolitions. It is transforming run down sectors and filling them with new housing, retail, and entertainment complexes meant to attract middle income professionals and the investment of international capital. Redevelopment is being enabled by the manipulation of tax dollars and also by a triangulated project to use the school closings and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), to displace low-income residents.

Renaissance 2010 has been designed to work in conjunction with the CHA in order to forward a privatization and gentrification agenda for some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. In the midst of its own ten year plan to raze 25,000 public housing units called, “The Plan for Transformation”, the CHA is working closely with the school system and big real estate developers to transform low-income spaces into new zones of mixed-income housing and corporate developments in retail, offices, and entertainment complexes. School closings and public housing demolitions are working together to clear out tens of thousands of people from neighborhoods primed for this corporate redevelopment. According to Terry Mazany the CEO of a large corporate trust and a member of the Civic Committee's Renaissance School Foundation, in order for gentrification to yield its maximum economic benefits schools have to be integrated into the mix. He claims that “redevelopment cannot take place without schools” and that “it's a delicate balance to pull something like this off. You can't do it just with the housing and retail development. You have to get the third leg and that's the schools” (Olszewski & Sadovi, 2004). The “third leg” is useful for moving out “culturally failing” populations and for providing clean new spaces for new more desirable residents. David Stovall notes:

Renaissance 2010 has very little to do with education and everything to do with gentrification in the name of development. Again, the politics of containment remain in check as white and affluent residents of the city (some who are persons of color) only have to see poorer residents during hours of work and remain free from worry in times of leisure (Stovall).

The city has been persistent in its attempts to frame the school closings as necessary for providing a higher quality of education for communities. But, after starving the schools in these communities of resources for decades, such appeals appear highly disingenuous especially when one looks at the way school closings are linked with privatization, corporate development, and gentrification. Once a school is chosen for closure by the Civic Committee's oversight body it is either closed permanently or closed for an extended period of time while the city does renovations, changes its name, and hires new personal to run it. While schools are closed, their former students are pushed-out of their neighborhoods and assigned to schools creating a variety of problems.

Although Daley and schools CEO Arne Duncan have publicly downplayed the negative consequences of school closures, they have consistently deflected demands by communities for comprehensive studies that map the consequences of student displacements. Once schools are targeted and closed, students are forced into schools outside of their neighborhoods and into communities that are being stressed by an influx of people from both public housing demolitions and school seizures. Pauline Lipman, in her independent study on the effects of school closures, has found that: (1) receiving schools lack the resources and support to properly deal with the large influx of students (2) closings produce a climate of anxiety and fear as teachers and families wonder if at any time they too will be notified that their school is set for annihilation (3) closings negatively affect teaching and learning as classrooms swell and schools are denied adequate resources (4) closures have contributed to increased violence due to students having to cross gang lines and due to the increased stress of overcrowding and competition over educational services (5) schools and communities feel like they are being "set up for failure" as they are starved of resources and forced to incorporate the influx of students (6) closures are also producing resentment over the lack of democracy and transparency and the disregard of community voice and participation (Lipman, Substance, 2007). Although public schools may be in need of resources and

investment, they still play a fundamental role in the daily fabric of life in communities. Lipman captures this point along with the sentiments of those who are resisting school closures:

The closing of schools is linked concretely and symbolically to the destruction of communities. Englewood High School is the signature school in Englewood. The February community meeting on Renaissance 2010 was filled with its former students. One of them said, "When you destroy a community's school, you destroy a community." This refrain has been repeated around the city. On the West Side, a North Lawndale resident called Renaissance 2010 "an act of war on the community." (Lipman, 2005)

These "acts of war" are responsible for dismantling and displacing these communities. Schools are being closed for up to two years. The thousands of kids who attend these schools are forced out of their neighborhoods to schools in surrounding low-income communities where gentrification has yet to take root. The public schools that have had to absorb these added students were the most likely to be already overcrowded and have had a difficult time making room. One parent responding to these forced migrations at a community meeting in Bronzeville in March 2005 said, "They're treating our children like livestock" (Ibid). Some of the schools are being permanently closed while others are reopened amidst a flurry of real estate development effectively pricing out the local families. Paul Street sees these new schools as primarily existing to "serve as 'real estate anchors' expanding corporate-downtown-proximate neighborhoods where it's all about keeping the new global professional class happy and in the city and spending money and boosting the exchange value of land along the way" (Street, 2006).

In the Bronzeville neighborhood, the historic heart and soul of Chicago's Black Community, the original Renaissance 2010 plan called for the closing of 20 of the neighborhood's 22 schools. This original proposal has since been rescaled due to fierce resistance and criticism. But school closures coupled with public housing demolitions have continued to radically transform Bronzeville. School closures have been set to coincide with the razing of the Robert Taylor Home public housing projects in the neighborhood. These massive apartment blocks, ignored and isolated for years, occupied a very visible symbol of state failures to invest in the city's low-income African American communities. The destruction of Chicago's housing

projects like Robert Taylor, Cabrini Green, and Stateway Gardens has opened up desirable spaces for large, new, mixed-income real-estate developments (Lipman, 2005). On the surface, the idea of mixed-income housing, neighborhoods, and schools seems like a laudable goal. However, the city has pursued these projects without providing a plan to account for the tens of thousands of people displaced from these communities and who will not be accommodated by the new developments. The city is displacing populations without dealing with the systemic forces which produce poverty. The displaced families are relocating to spaces where the same root causes continue to perpetuate themselves (Lipman, 2008).

Moreover, the developments have tended to capitalize on the history of the neighborhoods, while concurrently materially and symbolically erasing the presence of their former inhabitants. Legend's South is the largest of the new developments in Bronzeville, and, like its smaller twin, Jazz on the Boulevard, it has appropriated the aesthetic of Bronzeville's cultural history to appeal to upper income professionals who are enticed to purchase \$500,000 homes through the hip flavoring of the neighborhood's African American jazz and blues heritage (Lipman & Hirsch, 2007). But the struggle and loss that characterized the music of Bronzeville musicians like Muddy Waters, is in fact being recycled in novel forms as populations are displaced and their former communities re-branded, packaged, and sold off to eager buyers. The new neighborhoods are advertised as bringing a "future of new opportunity and hope" where "the sounds of life, of culture and of style are once again being heard on the south side" (Thrush).

While dismissing that they might have participated in something that resembled "life, culture, and style", the CHA - working in public-private partnerships with real-estate developers is only planning to resettle 10%-18% of former public housing residents in the new mixed income developments (Venkatesh, 2004). The thousands of displaced families have been sent packing to shoddy rental units in overcrowded slums or, increasingly, pushed out of the city altogether. Citywide, the numbers resemble more an urban refugee crisis than an urban renewal plan, more than 18,000 apartments destroyed, 42,000 people evicted. The families that have been allowed to remain are placed under strict surveillance and restrictions. Resettlement only occurs in the new developments after those displaced residents agree to extensive rules of conduct

which prohibit barbecuing in public space and entertaining people on porches. These residents must also submit to regular drug screening. These restrictions isolate and deny the low-income residents the same basic rights afforded to their neighbors (Pattillo, 2007). The rules of containment are designed to make the new middle class neighbors feel comfortable, and in control, while cleansing the area of both its former identity and the majority of its former inhabitants. In effect, the policy codifies a set of practices that are sanitizing historically black neighborhoods in the interest of profit and the reclamation of city space for the upper classes. A public housing resident has commented:

They tearing down all the buildings and they getting ready to build new homes. You know how they say the white people moved all the way to the suburbs because they don't want to be around us? So now they building all these new homes knowing damn well that we can't afford them. So they trying to get the white people back in. And that's the system. They want this lakefront back.
(Ibid, p. 11)

Concluding Remarks

After more than three decades of neoliberal reforms, the Chicago Public Schools find themselves in a state of disarray. While languishing for resources and operating under the threat of privatization, test scores continue to lag below the national average and drop-out rates have continued to hold above 40%. In addition, many CPS graduates struggle to find employment in an increasingly competitive and insecure economy and when they do, the jobs that are available often pay low wages and provide few, if any, benefits. As Sudhir Venkatesh chronicles in *Off the Books*, his wonderfully lucid and detailed ethnographic study of a South Side neighborhood in Chicago, so called “off-the-books employment” is a simple fact of survival in many communities, where complex networks of interdependent, under-the-table, and often illegal economic activities are the only thing keeping many people from complete destitution (Venkatesh, 2006). Moreover, a coarsening of attitudes regarding the poor, combined with harsh sentencing laws and an expansive and aggressive police department has created a revolving door of incarceration for many Black and Hispanic youth in the city. Through the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are required to make student records and hallways available to military recruiters while new synergies between low-income schools and law enforcement, the proliferation of zero-tolerance policies,

and the criminal justice system enable swift and decisive punishment for children who break the rules at school. As Angela Davis has argued, schools are increasingly serving to expand the gaze of law enforcement within communities of color while regulating and disciplining youth in the framework of a school to prison-pipeline (Davis, 2005).

Chicago's neoliberal agenda has been implemented and enforced with little to no regard for the recommendations and thoughts of the communities it is affecting. The recent history of school reform has shown that the Daley administration is committed to "as little democracy as possible" as it maneuvers to break unions, Local School Councils, and wields its unquestionable authority to impose a narrow commercial structure on schools. But contrary to what free market advocates like to proclaim, the future is not inevitable. Paulo Freire once wrote that "the cornerstone of the educational adventure is precisely the unfinished nature of our historical presence in the world and our consciousness of that unfinishedness" (Freire, p.127). The future is necessarily open, and while the ground covered in this paper paints a grim picture of the neoliberalization of public education in Chicago, it is essential to point out that hopeful and democratic energies are very much alive and well. Thousands of students, teachers, community and social organizations, and employee unions across a diverse range of backgrounds have taken up this issue by speaking out, picketing at board meetings, making documentary films, holding press conferences and staging public meetings, and working through online forums to educate and speak out [13]. In one exceptional case in 2004 in the Little Village neighborhood, residents took part in a hunger strike in order to draw attention to their desperate need for a new High School, which the city eventually agreed to build amidst the negative press. As the links between Renaissance 2010 and a corporate agenda have become more commonly registered in the public mind, the movement against the plan has gained increased traction.

Deprived of a fair share of resources, viable employment opportunities, and a voice in political decisions, the future of Chicago's low-income communities of color remains uncertain. As the lack of democracy and the social dislocations of neoliberal policies like Renaissance 2010 become more visible and intense, hopefully the organization, scope, and power of resistance will continue to grow. Perhaps, Chicago will once

again take a leadership position in the promotion of progressive education and become a central site in the reinvigoration of broad-based democratic politics. Such a politics must find a way to discredit neoliberalism's loudest advocates and its most pernicious policies. Moreover, it must work to renew public education in order to provide all youth, especially the poorest and hitherto the most disposable, with an education focused not merely on providing basic skills but on nurturing their critical and creative potential.

Notes

1. For a wealth of statistics concerning CPS check out their web site at:

<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/>

2. Neoliberal theory is rooted in an ethos of limited government, individual freedom, efficiency, and fiscal discipline, but it has in many cases led to unchecked government expansion, authoritarian policies, record breaking deficits, as well as corporate waste and fraud. In addition, while the public sphere is systematically dismantled, states have invested heavily in defense spending and in internal security services. In the United States defense spending nears \$500 billion a year while historic records are being shattered for domestic incarceration, with currently 1.6 million, or, 1 out of 100 Americans, behind bars. This belies the terrific distance between neoliberal theory and its lived reality. Far from creating a more free and prosperous society, thirty years of market reforms have decimated the poor and lead to the erosion of the middle-class.

3. This re-interpretation of Adam's Smith's "invisible hand" is said to derive its legitimacy at least partly from its ethical neutrality. In his essay, "The Methodology of Positive Economics", Milton Friedman argued that economics should be rationalized as an "objective" science thereby detached from historical context and culture. He claimed that "it is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgment...it deals with 'what is' not with 'what ought to be'" (Friedman quoted in Day, p. 2). Where for Friedman the market is based on "objective" principles, Friedrich Hayek viewed it as a "spontaneous evolutionary order" that transcends human agency altogether. For Hayek, the laws of the market have emerged through immanent historical interactions, ruptures, and developments (Hayek, 1991).

To deny its legitimacy is akin to a transgression against history itself. In Hayek's view, it is necessary to eliminate any and all barriers to the market in order for its intrinsic evolutionary and ethical efficiencies to flourish.

4. *The Secret* refers to both a film and an accompanying book. Both hype a new age therapeutic program based in a mystical "law of attraction". The basic idea is that through our own individual cosmic concentration we can determine and define our own destinies however we wish. If one wishes to be wealthy, one need only come to believe in the imminent arrival of riches and it will become so. Our personal desires, then, become the sole factor in shaping the contours of our lives, thus erasing history, race, class, gender, and other determinate structures of power. *The Secret* has built an enormous commercial empire, both the DVD and the book have topped bestseller lists at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and the New York Times. It is through spectacles like *The Secret* that the 'common sense' of neoliberalism is pedagogically constructed throughout the culture. I urge anyone with an interest in Cultural Studies to check out the first part of the movie online at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b1GKGWJbE8

5. Ken Saltman has extensively documented how these policies have, in fact, been miserable failures. See his books *The Edison Schools* and *Capitalizing on Disaster* for accounts of how charter schools, for profit schools, and testing schemes have been anything but efficient, while they have also failed spectacularly to improve educational quality.

6. For an excellent database of articles on No Child Left Behind see *Rethinking Schools* online at:

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/index.shtml

7. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault positions the school as one institutional context, among many, where political rationalities and "technologies of control" are developed and articulated. According to Foucault, schools, and the discursive regimes guiding their operation, are bound up inextricably with the overarching contingent historical logics in which they are located. As occupying a position somewhere between the state, civil society, and community, schools are a site of struggle where governing

discourses and practices are implemented, modified, and resisted. . They are part of an organizational structure which is built for universalizing the gaze of power over bodies so as to inculcate the requisite disciplinary codes to render them self-regulating and pliable.

8. According to Loic Wacquant “a ghetto is essentially a sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital” (Wacqaunt).

9. The Heartland Alliance should not be confused with the Heartland Institute. Whereas the Heartland Alliance is a social justice oriented human rights organization, the Heartland Institute is a radical free market think tank that specializes in developing reports defending big Tobacco and Oil companies.

10. Economic redundancy refers to labor that has been utterly devalued under specific historical contexts of production. Marx claimed that redundant laborers constituted “capital’s reserve army”, populations whose labor becomes obsolete in particular cycles and modes of economic activity. For more on economic redundancy and the de-politicization and criminalization of the black working class under conditions of late capitalism see Loic Wacquant’s essay “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration” available online at: <http://newleftreview.org/A2367>

11. Giroux has been careful to delineate between the political economy of neoliberalism and neoliberal culture, in order to theorize the myriad ways they inform one another. He has argued that neoliberalism is both a political project, meant to enforce transnational capitalist interests, and a cultural project, which functions in a Gramscian sense, building ‘common sense’ through pedagogical outlets within the broader social sphere. See his books *The Abandoned Generation* and *The Terror of Neoliberalism* for more on his critique of neoliberalism.

12. There is a collection of Joravsky’s articles on TIF’s available at: <http://www.chicagoreader.com/tifarchive/>

13. Check out the documentary, *Renaissance 2010: On the Front Lines* directed by Chicago teachers Jackson Potter and Albert Ramirez. Available online at:
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4615357395093985456>

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