

No Child Left Behind: A Neoliberal Repackaging of Social Darwinism

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“One of the greatest mistakes is to judge a policy on its intentions rather than its results.”

-Milton Friedman

It is widely believed that the end of Nazism, and the postwar era brought an end to academic theories and discourses regarding inherent racial inferiority. There was little tolerance Hawkins (1997) argues, for biological justifications for racism, war, and exploitation. The infamous Social Darwinism of key intellectual Herbert Spencer, and its explicit eugenics, racist, and free-market ideology of “Survival of the Fittest,” was rendered unfashionable as Western democracies were quick to disassociate themselves with explicitly Nazi-related ideologies (Degler 1992). However, the 1960’s and 70’s “pop ethology” of Ardrey’s *African Genesis* (1961), Morris’s *The Naked Ape* (1967), and Tiger, and Fox’s *The Imperial Animal* (1971) to name a few, depicted humankind as naturally aggressive, selfish, racist, and sexist, and would go on to heavily influence the emergent fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology which Hawkins (1997) and Gould (1977) describe as more scientifically and theoretically advanced forms of Social Darwinism. Leading sociobiologists E.O Wilson and Richard Dawkins repeatedly deny any associations with Spencer’s Darwinist interpretations, and maintain that their science is sound, objective, and value-free, but they seem to miss the point that any theory regarding human nature has the historical trend of influencing social policy (Kuper 1996).

And so aside from controversial sub-fields in biology and genetics, Social Darwinism has also resurfaced in neoliberal economics and free-market policies where the similarities between Spencer and Friedman Hayek’s (1994) brand of unrestricted markets are almost identical. This paper shall discuss the historical continuities between Spencer’s Social Darwinism, and the essentialist ideals of meritocracy, selfishness, and competition that are advanced by neoliberalism, and that underpin the Bush Administration’s neoliberal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). According to neoliberal rhetoric, the education system is largely seen as the ultimate arbiter of innate intelligence and ability, as well as the benefactor of hard-work and merit, and so its analysis in relation to contemporary education policies and their overarching philosophy is fitting and should provide for critical retrospective and prospective reflections. Furthermore, I

contend that neoliberal policies like NCLB have taken what I will refer to as a Neo-Spencerian outlook on education that has abandoned racial inferiority theories, but continues to celebrate unfettered markets, which have only led to further racialised underperformance (Hursh and Martina 2003). Therefore, structural explanations for racialised educational underachievement are overlooked if not replaced by market-based standards of performance, and thus only serve to give fodder to Spencer's still popular legacy of racial inferiority.

Moreover, I do not wish to overlook the significance of sociobiology and its highly influential academic advocates, particularly as some of their work remains popular within contemporary culture. The best-selling 1994 book *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray, which seeks to give biological explanations for differences in IQ's between "races," comes to mind. However, I contend that any "scientific" claims made about human nature and racial inequalities serve as complementary add-ons to an economic infrastructure. Hence, I find the analytic overview of that infrastructure more useful and more telling, particularly as any government policy enacted in the US has inherent economic priorities, which as the Bush's Administration's stance on global warming reminded us, often supersede scientific theories. Finally, I shall not dwell too much into the specifics of the NCLB Act and its subsequent related policies. Instead, this paper will focus on the results of the Act since its implementations in the year 2002 (which include the aforementioned racialised underperformance and the continuing commercialization of education explained later), as they make for more relevant points of discussion and analyses.

Social Darwinism and its Neoliberal Present

Before I begin my discussion, I should note that Social Darwinism is a broad field that has leftist political tones as well. Darwin's co-founder of natural selection Alfred Russell Wallace, and anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin (a naturalist and contemporary of Wallace), both viewed evolution as a driving force for altruism and cooperative living, one that encouraged mutual aid rather than mutual struggle (Shermer 2002). Nonetheless, like Kropotkin and Wallace themselves, this version of Social Darwinism has become a footnote in history, and so I shall instead focus my discussion

on the more historically prevalent right-wing version as advocated by one of the leading 19th century sociologists and public intellectuals, Herbert Spencer (Hawkins 1997).

Drawing on Darwin's theory of natural selection, Spencer concluded that the laws of biology could be suited for and combined with social theory to explain the enormously stratified Western societies of the 19th century. Given that nature has selected for fitness, Spencer's brand of Social Darwinism, "ranked human groups and cultures according to their assumed level of evolutionary attainment" (Gould 1977:38), with white Western Europeans and their American descendants being on top of the social order. Spencer argued that the white race was the fittest and strongest because of its accumulated wealth and power throughout the world, and therefore the status quo of his day, which included variants of remaining chattel slavery and ongoing Western colonialization of non-European peoples and countries (Zinn 2001), was just a bi-product of the laws of nature. Those civilizations more advanced in industry were thus more evolved than non-industrial societies, and as a product of social and biological evolution, needed less state intervention. This "evolutionary" distinction between industrial and non-industrial societies was also the basis for Spencer's political-economic thought: which decried the evils of an interventionist state, and promoted individualism and laissez-faire capitalism as the system by which non-civilized individuals and societies can further evolve. As Hawkins (1997:89) notes, "By the last quarter of the century this creed-known as "Individualism"-was deployed by the opponents of the "New Liberalism." The Individualists fought to reassert what was as the essence of liberalism-negative freedom and laissez-faire-and Spencer was their most prestigious advocate.". Central to his thought was the misnomer that evolution meant progress (a still widely evident misunderstanding of Darwinian theory, see Gould 1977), thus less state intervention meant that unregulated market-forces would lead humanity to even greater progress.

Although Spencer saw any state intervention as a hurdle to natural competition and survival, four years after his death in 1903, his legacy would be adopted, enhanced, and taken to its logical conclusion by his friend and eugenics founder Francis Galton (Greta and Jones 2004). The role of the state according to Galton should thus be to contain the progeny of savages and the unfit for the sake of the human race. And while it

can be argued that Galton and Spencer had sordid yet strictly scientific motivations for their theories, Galton's solution, along with Spencer's ideology merged conveniently well with the economic priorities of developing Western capitalism, and would go on to heavily influence the imperialist aims of America and Western Europe, "where American, and European leaders sought to liberate barbarians from their sad fate (Chomsky 2003:63)." As Chomsky (2003:64) observes:

The enlightened states sought to actively civilize the naughty children of the world, and force them to accept a free-market system. President Taft would predict, "The day is not distant when the whole hemisphere will be ours in fact, as, by virtue of our superior race, it already is ours morally." Latin America may not understand the Wilson administration would later add, "But that is because they are naughty children who are exercising all the privileges and rights of grown ups, and require a stiff authoritarian hand.

The list of such statements by successive American and European leaders (albeit contemporary statements are more politically correct), continue till now, as under the guise of a superior yet benevolent racial and intellectual force, the "enlightened states" have intervened (to put it lightly) throughout the world, while simultaneously opening up new markets, and establishing governments friendly to Western corporations and free-market doctrines. Over the last century, the US has taken the lead in such ordeals, and from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, it is a continuing legacy that remains as evident by the current Iraq and Afghan Wars (Andreas 2004).

However, prominent evolutionary biologists like Gould (1977) and Lewinton (1995), along with the Chicano, and Civil Rights movements of the 1960's have also had significant influence on the racialised political landscape, where race most academics would argue, is a social construction, not a biological one. While genetic racial classifications are advanced by sociobiology, it is nonetheless a marginalized opinion, whereby the abovementioned statements by Presidents Taft and Wilson, would be inconceivable in contemporary political discourse. Thus, notions of racial superiority have been thoroughly dismissed regarding official governmental policy and rhetoric, but the individualist notions of free-market capitalism as advocated by Spencer have remained, and are practically identical to those of neoliberal philosophy (Lund 2002).

The only significant difference being that race presumably does not matter in a neoliberal market meritocracy, as the market creates opportunities for all to prosper. Oprah, Tiger Woods, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice to name a few, are all thwarted out examples of America's endless opportunity, where anyone can achieve the "American Dream" (measured solely in acquisition of material wealth and power). The free-market is seen as the best economic system by which to promote such opportunities, and reward merit and hard work. Individual failings are just that, and attributed to laziness and lack of drive, motivation, and intelligence: individual characteristics that are not necessarily racial ones, but that consequently absolve the state and societal institutions from any responsibility.

And so contemporary neoliberal discourse has seemingly chosen to ignore its Social Darwinist legacy and related imperial brutality, and disguised itself as a one-size fits all utopian ideology that wishes to bring the wonders of laissez-faire capitalism to everyone in the world. As Milton Friedman put it (1980)¹, "The most important single central fact about a free market is that no exchange takes place unless both parties benefit." The Keynesian welfare system of the 1950's and 60's that created the growth and dominance of the American middle-class (Cohen 2003), was hence seen as a hurdle to economic progress, and a return to 19th century economics is now seen as preferable if not crucial to the hegemony of American interests and power (Giroux 2005). Friedman (2002) and Hayek (1994) the architects of neoliberal economics, argue that by curtailing as much of the state as possible, selling off and dismantling social services, privatizing national and public resources, and simply letting the market be; a stable yet dynamic society will emerge. Thus, the free-market is race-neutral, and if left unchecked Fukuyama (1999) argues, can progress and propel all of humanity into a global liberal democracy anchored by individualism, competition, and self-interest.

However, Duggan (2003:16) points out, "Neoliberalism cannot be abstracted from race and gender relations, or other cultural aspects of the body politic. Its legitimating discourse, social relations, and ideology are saturated with race, with gender, with sex, with religion, with ethnicity, and nationality." As Cole (1999) observes, the destruction of the welfare system has gone hand in hand with the emergence of the

¹ PBS TV Series 1980 "Free to Choose" by Economist Milton Friedman

prison-industrial system, where millions not blessed with color, class, and gender privileges are merely contained and locked away, less they create any trouble for the capitalist establishment: imprisonment has seemingly and partly replaced eugenics. Corporate profits are prioritized over democracy, and in either public or foreign policy, the neoliberal infrastructure is branded in all current US Federal policies from Iraq to education (Giroux 2005). It is a new and ruthless type of Social Darwinism Bourdieu (1998:35) would argue, one that:

Appeals to progress, reason, and science (economics in this case) to justify the restoration and so tries to write off progressive thought and action as archaic. It sets up as the norm of all practices, and therefore as ideal rules, the real regularities of the economic world abandoned to its own logic, the so-called laws of the market. It reifies and glorifies the reign of what are called the financial markets, in other words, the return to a kind of radical capitalism, with no other law than that of maximum profit, an unfettered capitalism without any disguise, but rationalized, pushed to the limit of its economic efficacy by the introduction of modern forms of domination, such as ‘business administration’, and techniques of manipulation, such as market research and advertising.

An Overview of NCLB and Results

After a contentious victory in 2000, The Bush Administration’s first legislative act was No Child Left Behind, signed into law in 2002. As the economies of the world were being more and more intertwined, interdependent, and interconnected, schools we were told were failing to adequately prepare students for the global market. In the NCLB forward, Bush² would state, “The quality of our public schools directly affects us all as parents, as students, and as citizens. Yet too many children in America are segregated by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce, children are literally being left behind.” The NCLB policy was enacted to create educational systems that appropriately trained skilled and entrepreneurial citizens and workers able to generate new and added

² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html>. Foreword by President George W. Bush

economic values within the international marketplace (Robertson, 2000). It is by all accounts and measures argue Torres (2008) and Hursh (2007) a brainchild and manifestation of neoliberalism.

While providing only ten percent of total school funding, the NCLB Act granted the federal government the power to determine which subject areas take precedence, limit the ways in which they may be taught, and designate what reform options are available to schools and districts that fail to sufficiently improve their test scores (Hursh and Martina 2003). States can choose not to abide by the act, but would have to make do without federal funding. Students in schools designated as failing for two consecutive years (and in some states this is ninety percent of the schools), are given the option of enrolling in nearby or distant successful schools depending on the options available (Hursh and Martina 2003). Among a lengthy list of provisions, NCLB substantially increased the testing requirements for states, demanded accountability standards for schools, districts, and states, with measurable adequate yearly progress (AYP) objectives for all students regardless of race, class, gender, or disability (Linn et al. 2002). Its advocates claim that it increases the quality of education by shrinking classroom sizes, and by requiring schools to utilize scientifically based research practices in the classroom, parent involvement programs, and professional development activities for those students that are not expected to attend college. It also requires that schools nationwide meet standards for reading, math, and science, and is a standard's based approach to education reform largely influenced by 1996 National Education Summit, in which 44 governors and 50 corporate CEOs set the following priorities (Achieve, 1998),

- * High academic standards and expectations for all students.
- * Tests that are more rigorous and more challenging, to measure whether students are meeting those standards.
- * Accountability systems that provide incentives and rewards for educators, students, and parents to work together to help students reach these standards.

A 2006 report by the Department of Education³ indicated that Latino and African American reading scores for nine-year olds reached an all time high. Forty-three states either improved academically or held steadily in eight-grade reading and math. However,

³ 2006 No Child Left Behind Act Is Working. Department of Education

Hursh (2007:506) argues, “Schools are not evaluated on whether their test scores are improving, but whether they’re aggregated and disaggregated test scores exceed a minimum yearly threshold that gradually increases over the next decade.” As such any success rates can be equally attributed to “gaming the system,” strategies employed by schools, districts, and states that creatively and artificially inflate scores, particularly as states can dictate the level of testing difficulty.

A 2008 report issued by America's Promise Alliance⁴, found that about half of the students served by public school systems in the nation's largest cities received diplomas. Students in suburban and rural public high schools were more likely to graduate than their counterparts in urban public high schools. Nationally, about 70 percent of US students graduate on time with a regular diploma and about 1.2 million students drop out annually: those 1.2 million being primarily low-income minority students from disenfranchised urban neighborhoods, urban being an accepted euphemism for working-class city dwelling Latino and African Americans. Nationwide, the dropout rates have been cleverly and artificially lowered, with students that dropout being listed as having transferred to an alternative school, or working on a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (Lewin and Medina 2003). Moreover, Hursh (2007) argues that the AYP scores set on schools are more telling of a student’s socioeconomic position than a particular school’s teaching abilities. In 2002 in New York for instance, 86% of failing schools were located in the five biggest urban districts (Hursh 2007). Metcalf (2002) notes that the NCLB act makes no attempt to address the funding inequities among rich and poor school districts within states that help to perpetuate the achievement gaps, or the chronic underfunding of poorer schools.

Huberman (2003) argues that the NCLB was specifically designed to make schools fail in order to clear the road for voucher and charter schools (experimental publicly funded private schools with minimal regulation). Charter schools are neoliberalism’s logical conclusion for education, where schools should become for-profit institutions (Trammel 2005). The Bush administration actively pushed for voucher programs and charter schools, going as far as making a provision within the original

⁴ http://www.americaspromise.org/uploadedFiles/AmericasPromiseAlliance/Dropout_Crisis/SWANSONCitiesInCrisis040108.pdf.

NCLB that provided \$70 million for voucher “demonstration programs” (Huberman 2003), with another \$250 million proposed for the 2008 fiscal year (Klein 2007). Moreover, The NCLB goal of 100% passing test rates for all states by the year 2014 (Linn et al. 2002), seems a very difficult task, one that if not accomplished will only add to the free-market solution frenzy currently associated with charter schools: and that further falls in line with the neoliberal discourse decrying the incompetence of public institutions (Trammel 2005). The fact that NCLB was severely under-funded by billions making the act’s initiatives even harder to accomplish (Haberman 2003), is generally considered a moot point as foreign policy funding continues to take precedence to protect us from the “evil doers.” Hence, the state cannot be bothered with social services like school funding, that’s an individual’s responsibility, or so the neoliberal rhetoric goes.

Furthermore, even if the 2014 quotas are accomplished, the results are measured by standardized tests that requires an ability on the student to choose the right answer, which consequently, Boyles (2005) argues, circumvents critical inquiry since meaning and understanding are replaced with methods specifically concerned with automated and uncritical acceptance of correct answers. Nationwide teachers have reported that they have spent significant amounts of time “teaching to the test,” in reading, math, and science, while consequently eroding time spent on social studies and arts (Hursh 2007). The bottom line for schools has become not learning, but achieving higher and higher test scores (Tammell 2005). This discourages critical thinking while encouraging intense competition not only between schools and districts, but between students as well, as higher test scores are rewarded with scholarships and admissions into top universities; a hyper-competitive atmosphere that also circumvents co-operation and co-operative behavior between students.

Strapped for funding, many schools have turned to business-school partnerships, where businesses, and corporations provide funding to schools in exchange for publicity and advertisement space (Boyles 2005). Hewitt (2005) argues that these partnerships go a long way in fostering within students, an unquestionable faith and inherit benevolence in corporate America. Anything from curriculum creation to fund-raising, corporations have stepped in where the state and federal governments have neglected or been unable to fund, and have turned many schools into shopping malls where parents can purchase

anything from chocolates to wrapping paper (Breault 2005). Molnar argues (1996:25), “The problem with this is that students and teachers become subsumed in market logic that, in part because of its pervasiveness, appears (therefore becomes) impervious to critique.” That is not to say that students and teacher’s lack critical agency, but the socializing effects of individuals into the neoliberal milieu given the immense and highly psychologically developed saturation of corporate propaganda (Chomsky 2002), should not be dismissed or overlooked. Particularly as cotemporary American youth unlike any other generation in history, are bombarded with unprecedented amounts of corporate advertisements: over 1500 a day, that only serve to reinforce consumer-oriented messages (Johnston et al. 2000). And so the commercialization of education that NCLB breeds and advances argues Torres (2008:7), “is part of a larger political and ideological effort to privatize social programs, reduce the public sector, and ultimately replace local control of institutions like schools with marketplace reforms that substitute democratic relations between citizens for commercial relations between customers.”

Finally, Human-Capital theory, a neoliberal derivative that synergizes education with the economy (Hartley 2003), frames the NCLB Act where education is measured by how well it prepares students for employability in the post-Fordist neo-managerial economy (Ball 1997, Fitzimons and Peters 1994). Such policies are seen as necessary to remedy what is presented as a crisis of public education because of its alleged failure to train competent workers (Beckman and Cooper 2004). However, the high-stakes standardized testing and meritocratic idealism promoted by those policies further serve to instill a rigid individualism where failure is blamed on the individual and not on systemic institutions (Agostinone-Wilson 2006). Even teamwork and cooperation within the classroom is arguably geared towards the neoliberal worldview via the creation of the correct worker attitude, based on the idea that social skills are necessary for the developing service economy. Agostinone-Wilson (2006:1) argues, “Promoting classroom management as a way to build ‘teamwork’ or steering students toward ‘self-regulation’, work together to ultimately shape attitudes and dispositions toward a capitalist ethos, embodied in the modern corporation.” From curriculum, to classroom activities and organization, to standardized tests, to the ranking of schools, contemporary education policy is predicated upon the belief that globalization is inevitable, and so students must

be trained to be rational consumers, and to learn and accept their role within the global economy.

Some Discontinuities and End Thoughts

While the NCLB largely enhances the role of the private sector in education, it still seeks to provide universal compulsory education. In that regard it is radically different from Spencer's Social Darwinism in which education as anything else should only be provided to those who can afford it, ala those whom the market/natural selection has deemed worthy of. School choice and vouchers are market approaches that seek to transform education into a commodity, but the government still intends to pay for those vouchers and programs at least initially, something Spencer might have viewed as a crime against nature, whereby the children of the unfit will merely squander government subsidies because of their inherit inability. As O'Dowd (1997:1) notes, "Herbert Spencer, denounced all forms of provision for the unfortunate whether public or private, socially harmful; according to Herbert Spencer the unsuccessful should die. If they did not die before they reproduced (which was first prize) their children should die too," A rather harsh opinion that I do not believe was shared by Friedman and Hayek, or by contemporary education policy makers whatever their politics may be. Contemporary education rhetoric and its neoliberal foundation do have the laudable pronounced goals of raising the standards of underachieving working-class and minority students, but as my opening quote suggests, policy should be measured by results not intentions. Doing so reveals that NCLB is not working and is highly discriminatory towards the poor and people of color (Hursh 2007). Its implicit aims are to both dismantle public education and turn students into uncritical competitive consumptive citizens within a global market (Leyva, 2008, Boyles 2005).

Overall, I have tried to draw existing correlations between Social Darwinism, Neoliberalism, and NCLB, as they are all intertwined. Spencer's "survival of the fittest" ideology is branded in all these aspects, where selfish competition is deemed the most appropriate behavior that should be promoted by governments and schools, and internalized by the citizenry at large under the presumption that a globalized utopian

economy that efficiently serves all will somehow arise. In true hegemonic fashion, it is a taken for granted ideology as Democrats and Republicans alike differ only over funding of education, but not over the dominant stance of training and creating competent-enough workers rather than critical conscientious citizens, affirmatively summed up by 2004 Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry referring to the NCLB as a jobs act (Torres 2008). Criticism of such a narrow corporate view of education is discouraged if not completely disregarded in mainstream political debate, and so issues of social justice continue to be marginalized. Latino racialised underachievement in schools (Holcomb-McCoy 2007), continues to fuel the conservative bigotry whose recent manifestations have led to blatant nation wide anti-immigrant legislation, persecution, and oppression. Completely erroneous texts like the Bell Curve, whose conclusions and methodology have been severely criticized, only serve to add to the mainstream fodder of inherent racial intelligence differences (Naureckas 1995), and to the neoliberal discourse of welfare cutbacks. As stated earlier the “scientific claims” for racialised differences are merely complementary add-ons that serve the prioritized economic infrastructure of neoliberalism. Bell Curve authors Herrnstein and Murray echoing Spencer almost exactly argue (1994:548):

We can imagine no recommendation for using the government to manipulate fertility that does not have dangers. But, this highlights the problem: The United States already has policies that inadvertently social-engineer who has babies, and it is encouraging the wrong women. If the United States did as much to encourage high-IQ women to have babies as it now does to encourage low-IQ women, it would rightly be described as engaging in aggressive manipulation of fertility. The technically precise description of America's fertility policy is that it subsidizes births among poor women, who are also disproportionately at the low end of the intelligence distribution. We urge generally that these policies, represented by the extensive network of cash and services for low-income women who have babies, be ended.

Incidentally, coauthor Charles Murray works for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative neoliberal think tank whose former fellows include former Vice-president Dick Cheney and currently, former US Secretary of State and World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz.

Among the many fallacious taken for granted assumptions of neoliberalism and its advocates are the notions of meritocracy and natural economics. The free-marketiers somehow seem to miss the obvious fact that we do not all start at a level playing field, and that those of us born with racial, class, and gender privileges have a disproportionate advantage over others, an advantage brought about by imperial savagery not inherent superior genes. To ignore this very basic historical account seems intellectually dishonest, scientifically flawed, and outright inhumane. Merit in America is a myth (Barry 2001) that ignores history, and that cannot be accurately measured given all the political, economic, and socio-cultural disadvantages faced by non-white peoples. Moreover, the market is not an efficient and unbiased proprietor of wealth and prosperity; it has a clear and observable slant in favor of Anglo peoples. And for every Oprah or Jennifer Lopez that exists, there are millions more African and Latino Americans that dwell in poverty and never achieve the “American Dream.” Those are hardly efficient proportions and quotas, at least if measured by neoliberal criteria for success and accountability. Finally, as Veblen (1898) an economist and contemporary of Herbert Spencer argues, economics is not an evolutionary science, the free-market is not politically objective and value-free and thus cannot be separated from its socio-political embedment.. The free-market like languages, cultures, and political systems, is a social construction, and as such we can and do directly influence its outcomes. It is a naturalistic fallacy to assume otherwise, and among the many difficult tasks that those of us interested in genuine democratic ideals of equality of opportunity and resources for all must undertake, is to continually and pronouncedly argue that the laws of economics are not fixed, they do not wholly represent human behavior, and they are anything but laws of nature. In doing so we can help to advance the counter-hegemonic discourse currently resurfacing in the Post-Autistic Economics movement⁵, as well as directly challenge the taken for granted hegemonic ideologies and their barbaric public and foreign policy manifestations. Contrary to popular belief, this is not the end of history.

⁵ www.paecon.net . A Brief History of the Post-Autistic Economics Movement

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