

Insecurity: The Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism

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Neoliberalism and Representation: Branding Subjectivity

Introduction

Democracy and education can only exist in the neoliberal context as fetishes and empty symbols, manipulated and deployed on a for-profit basis. The insecurity engendered by neoliberal thought and practice is, to a significant degree, a product of the instability of these concepts. Both the historical processes that constitute the notions of democratic participation in governance, if not the more distant dream of achieving a democratic structuring of everyday life, and the necessity for universal education to contribute to the development of the critical, democratic mind are obscured as they are instrumentalized as brands.

Neoliberal ‘democracy,’ as Noah indicates, can only exist as an empty signifier rather than a linguistic product of social labor: the labor of critical thought, active protest and courageous resistance against tyranny. Neoliberal logic re-discovers ‘democracy’ as a valuable common resource. Already cultivated and refined, it can be enclosed, appropriated and distributed for profit. Its affective power, constituted by the struggles contained in the word, is privatized, instrumentalized and deployed to manage desires and direct activity toward the production of surplus value and the accumulation of social power via monetized wealth and the manipulation of popular support. The integrity of democracy as a radical idea and practice, as a historical struggle as well as a form of governance may depend upon the struggle against the neoliberal enclosure of the concept itself. Only through the act of contesting the depletion of meaning can the concept of ‘democracy’ be reclaimed from neoliberalism and tethered to the struggles that constitute it.

The concept and practice of education under neoliberalism is treated much the same way as ‘democracy’, namely, as a social product ripe for privatization and deployment in the service of profits rather than fealty to its social and historical roots in struggles against tyrannical and exploitive rule. Victoria shows how the fetishized visual and statistical representations of schooling undermine the essential features of education, while Amanda demonstrates the way that charter schools existence as brands first and centers of learning second, both motivates and supports the quest for ‘success’ that has everything to do with a profitable business model and nothing to do with critical or democratic education.

Branding the World

Promotional culture before the era of neoliberalization had a qualitatively different relationship to social life and subjectivity. The period between the industrial revolution and the neoliberal revolution produced a mass culture of advertising to compensate for the mass production of manufactured goods. Stuart Ewen (2001) has demonstrated the concerted effort by the “Captains of Consciousness” to not simply alert and educate consumers to the attributes and benefits of the new products, but to build a new human being with new priorities and new social practices that support the proliferation of goods. In addition to the burgeoning advertising industry, Ewen (1996) also demonstrates the role of PR in the construction of not only a new consumer but a new kind of political subject, more aware of the distribution of power through his social world than previous subjectivities

and therefore in need of a more elaborate apparatus of informational management.

The shift from industrial dominance to financial dominance that marks the neoliberal era motivated another shift in the logic of promotional culture. Populations can no longer simply buy into a culture of consumption in order to sustain the ruling order, but must simultaneously be fully integrated into the flow of finance capital while still being kept ignorant of the political implications of that involvement: we have to be constantly involved in financial markets without being aware that our involvement is consciously managed toward the accrual of profit for a tiny minority of the global ruling class. The real subsumption of everyday life under the brand form becomes absolutely necessary to provide a sense of choice and identity while continually directing more and more thought and activity toward the accumulation of fictitious capital based on affective relationships that more or less consciously mask the actual processes of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value. The insecurity that is the lingua franca of neoliberalism is in large part attributable to the subsumption of life under the brand form because the dominance of the brand empties vital concepts like 'democracy' and 'education' of their social and historical content, monetizes the affective relationship that populations have with those concepts and deploys those branded relationships towards the accumulation of profit while obliterating the radically emancipating historical content that originally constituted the categories.

Democratic Language

Arriving at any opinion of democracy requires first extricating it from the various apparatuses today masquerading under the banner of its name. Wendy Brown explores how democracy has become an empty signifier, "Democracy is exalted not only across the globe today but across the political spectrum...we are all democrats now. But what is left of democracy?...No compelling argument can be made that democracy inherently entails representation, constitution, deliberation, participation, free markets, rights, universality, or even equality. The term carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves...democracy is an unfinished principle" (Agamben et al. 45). Brown suggests that the essentially empty signifier of 'democracy' can freely float around and be deployed by just about anyone to mean whatever they want – with the added bonus of the surplus value that the inarticulate 'good' brand nature the word bestows. This term occupies such force that one could look at just about any conflict or political event since the end of World War II (or at least since the fall of the Soviet Union) and see that the term is used as operative justification for this or that use of force or exceptional state, without the term ever being weighed down with a definite identity.

On May 6th for example we can look at Larbi Sadiki's Opinion piece on Aljazeera "Syria's 'spring' toward democracy." In it Sadiki calls for a careful approach to a 'democratic tipping point': "right now Arab masses, especially youths, have produced the momentum and the currents that are now creating critical mass. The tipping point does not come easy...This is just one more reason why Assad must recruit Syria's vibrant civil society into a collective search for democratic learning, outcomes and agendas." It is difficult to imagine just what Sadiki might be suggesting in these terms. But we can say for sure that he is suggesting that no shift in the essential governmental structure needs to take place and that Assad can and perhaps even should remain in power. All he needs is to begin learning "democratic language." This term is ironically deeply accurate. What leader today would not benefit from throwing around the brand identity of democracy? If Assad were to claim he was implementing democratic policies, which could mean just about anything, he would likely undermine some of the symbolic efficacy of the protester's demands—if not within Syria itself at least in the international

media. If he paid more attention to the ways the West has utilized this term to legitimate bringing to power various (actually autocratic) neoliberal leaders in the nations of the global South, perhaps he would not be incurring the stepladder of Western sanctions, which so often lead to military intervention right now.

Nowhere is the emptiness of the democratic signifier more clear than in the West's selective use of it with regard to the various Arab revolutions. We support democratic revolution in Libya, and *maybe* Syria, but we condemn protests with the same demands and format elsewhere. As Prabir Purkayastha puts it in another piece from May 6th, for Monthly Review Magazine, "France also shipped on an emergency basis police equipment and crowd-control devices to Tunisia at the height of the demonstrations. In Egypt, Mubarak's fall is widely seen in the Arab world as a defeat of a US puppet. Not surprisingly, the West is now trying to rewrite this recent history of supporting completely authoritarian forces by climbing on to the democratic bandwagon, first in Libya and now in Syria. Meanwhile, the democratic upsurge in Yemen, Bahrain, and even in eastern parts of Saudi Arabia have drawn no response from the West." All of the Arab protesters and all of the Westerners can agree they want democracy and that democracy is a good thing. Unfortunately that means almost nothing.

Brown suggests that much of this loss/destruction of the term democracy can be blamed on the assent of the hegemony of neoliberalism across the world's ideologies:

It is not simply a matter of corporate wealth buying (or being) politicians and overtly contouring domestic or foreign policy, nor of corporatized media that makes a mockery of informed publics or accountable power. More than intersecting, major democracies today feature a merging of corporate and state power...unapologetically harnessed to the project of capital accumulation via tax, environmental, energy, labor, social, fiscal, and monetary policy as well as an endless stream of direct support and bailouts for all sectors of capital. The populace, the demos, cannot fathom or follow most of these developments let alone contest them or counter them with other aims. Powerless to say no to capital's needs, they mostly watch passively as their own are abandoned (Agamben et al. 47).

Anything which we might endeavor to tie up with democracy (constitutions, equality, civil liberties, universal inclusion) is trampled over and forgotten about in the face of the unashamed pursuit of capital for capital's sake. The neoliberal dogma of "cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy" (Ibid.) become the logic of the state and by extension the average citizen. Anything that would be democracy can only play a subservient second fiddle to dominant neoliberal thought. It is no wonder that inadequate attention is paid to democratic principles since they are ultimately of secondary significance to the branded rhetoric.

Imag(e)ining Education

'Education,' like 'democracy' has also been emptied of much significance as schooling becomes synonymous with the same neoliberal regime of "cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy" (Ibid.) In order to understand the form and meaning of testing culture and the marketized school, we must investigate the way that scores and statistics come to represent students and teachers. The form of the marketized school is illuminated through an image-based analysis, deeply rooted in the context of our contemporary moment: a time of rapid advances in information and communication technologies and a pervasive visual-promotional culture, set against the backdrop of global neoliberalism. Ours is a time of twitter feeds and camera phones, constant streams of new

information—Facebook updates, the scrolling tickertape of financial news, webcams and the “recorded life.” In the competition for public attention, knowledge and images are ever concentrating and condensing into bits, bytes, and visual snippets. Google browser screens are designed to communicate the most amount of information in the shortest amount of time, because as the company proclaims, “every millisecond counts.” This mode of making (images) and seeing resonates with the promotional culture of branding. “In a competitive global economy characterized by surfeits of information and hypermediation, and corresponding deficits of time and attention, brands are heralded as the ‘imaginative genre’ (Poovey 2008) that can simplify, differentiate, and narrate a wide range of economic and social values” (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010). Brands—like Google web pages and much of our visual culture—are engineered to “message” extensive information at a glance. As the language of branding appropriates new social spaces (like democratic social movements), the visual scape grows saturated, and everyday life is increasingly financialized, our breakneck image culture is becoming the new normal.

What we know and how we think about public education is also constructed in images, visual fragments and shortcuts. Our notions of what schools are and should be often come out of media “images”—newspaper articles, the evening news, film, and television. The culture/ industry of educational testing is the most active producer of school imagery. Test scores, student rankings, and school grades—quantified and de-contextualized—function like market goods, but also like a kind of visual shorthand. As Vinson & Ross (2007) challenge, “how many times do individuals and groups determine the ‘effectiveness’ of particular schools by relying on test scores—*images*—whether or not they have any first-hand information on what actually occurs in any unique and concrete school environment?” The products of testing culture—scores, statistics, and rankings—are meant to convey with a single letter or number all of the “necessary” information about students, teachers, and schools. Numerical data, presented in statistical spreadsheets, graphs, and percentage points is associated with the culture of science, business, and fact (which in turn “builds the brand” of the administrators, politicians, foundations, or companies responsible). Devoid of tangible information, these blank materials encourage us to color them with our own values—to imagine the *‘effective’ teacher as nurturing or a ‘failing’ school as filled with teachers who don’t care*. Couched in complicated statistical analysis, the information is almost always impenetrable—there is no time or space within the report to explain exactly what is being measured or what the classroom looks and feels like. The aesthetic and content of the data comes to “brand” students and teachers with visual sound bites connoting their worth. Like brands, this school imagery is designed for quick and easy consumption.

Franchising School

Neoliberalism has affected every level of American life; from eating to schooling, corporations have transformed people into constant consumers. The previous section of this paper discussed how Neoliberalism has transformed education into a system of data and accountability. This section will discuss the charter school movement through the lens of neoliberalism and the role of branding in the success of charter school networks.

Neoliberalism has made many inroads to education with the passing of NCLB and Race to the Top, which shift the focus to accountability measured by standardized tests and on the de-professionalized teacher and school system. There are also provisions within the legislation that mandate school systems to move towards privatization of schooling. A percentage of Title I funds that are allocated explicitly for low income students now must be used to pay outside corporations and CBO’s for tutoring services under the Supplemental Education Services provision. Another move towards privatization is the support of charter schools, which are non-unionized and often controlled by

corporate boards.

Charter schools were begun as a progressive school choice initiative to give community control to schools. These charters were given to schools, so that they would have more accountability but more control with less governmental interference. Charter schools receive public money as well as private donations, no tuition may be charged and students attend the schools by choice. If there are not enough spaces for all interested students, charter schools often use a lottery or waiting list for admissions. These charter schools have morphed into privatized education over the last twenty years. This was made possible by the branding of charter schools as to create charter school networks that proliferate the market.

The majority of charter schools are still single entities, but increasingly, Education Management Organizations (EMO) or Charter Management Organizations (CMO) create and run charter schools across the United States. 10% of national charter schools are part of charter school networks that follow corporate models of expansion, and this number is on the rise. Charter school networks are either franchised or centrally controlled by management organizations (Bennett, 2008). Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) has a franchise model that is similar to McDonald's and other famous multi-nationals (2008). KIPP locates sites, raises funds, and recruits students, and in return each school franchise pays 1% of its revenues to KIPP (2008). "If a KIPP school fails to pass an annual inspection or meet its enrollment goals, or if its students fail to achieve, KIPP, too, will take away its name and support, but the school itself may remain open" (2008). The stripping of the brand name is the punishment for poor performance, which sheds light on just how important brand power is for charter schools. Brand names have inherent worth and in the case of charter schools that are based on parental choice, just having heard the name of the charter school is a first step in acquiring new students/customers.

The majority of CMO's opt for central management where each of the charter schools in the network are overseen by a central office. This means slower growth, but it does allow for larger control over the running of the school from curriculum to hiring practices (2008). These schools pay 8-10% of their budgets to the central offices, which provide many integral services to the management of the school like payroll, curriculum development, and human resources (2008). If a school does not perform well, principals and teachers are fired and replaced so as to ensure that the brand stays strong.

Branding in Action

The specter of choice is one of the linchpins of consumer culture, and charter schools exemplify this deeply held neoliberal value. Most charters are opened in low-income, highly segregated neighborhoods (the majority of students are black or Hispanic). Charters most show achievement quickly, however, low-income students of color tend to underperform middle-class and affluent whites on standardized testing. So choice is a conundrum, how do charter schools make it look like they are giving parents choice: the lottery. The names are picked at random while parents and students wait with bated breath, which is the trope of the documentaries *Lottery* and *Waiting for Superman*. Significantly, most charter schools have done away with the lottery and now choose students based on their interaction with the charter school network (pre-K or elementary), student support, achievement, and non-ELL or Special Education status. As Geoffrey Canada of Harlem's Children Zone found out, a truly random sampling would not give them the success on standardized tests that they wanted, so it is no longer a part of the process (Tough, 2008). A conveyor belt of pre-k, to elementary, to middle, and high school is the new model at HCZ, which socializes students to be test takers from the age of 2 (2008). There are many fewer special education and ELL students in Charter schools (2008), which skews test scores to meet accountability standards.

By leveraging established brands, charter schools are able to garner more interest, which in turn allows them to choose students that will lead to better success. A recent New York Times article about

the success of KIPP charter schools cites high attrition rates for black male students, small numbers of special needs students, and extreme focus on test preparation combined with increased funds from private corporations as the reasons for their continued success (Dillon, 2011).

Charter school networks represent a familiar conundrum in the neoliberal privatization of public sector services: they are marketed to low income minority students, but the schools must demonstrate superior student achievement (on tests) and scores from this community come up short. So it is in their best interest of charter schools to appear equanimous (to secure public funding and boost their brand image), while weeding out the students that need intervention the most. Luckily, corporations have always been good at covering up their bad practices with the varnish of brand power. Charter schools will continue to be an important issue in education and possibly the bellwether of neoliberalism's success in the "public" sphere.

Conclusion

In the case of democracy and education—the mediated use of democratic language in the 'Arab Spring,' educational testing culture engineered to produce certain kinds of school imagery, and the carefully contrived representations of charter schools—branding serves as a kind of cloak for financial exploitation and the absence of popular engagement. Within the contemporary context of information overload, brands function as 'sound bites,' incapable of nuance and subservient to powerful corporate and political interests. The dominance of the brand empties vital concepts like 'democracy' and 'education' of their social and historical content, monetizes the affective relationship that populations have with those concepts, and deploys branded relationships towards the accumulation of profit.

Conversely, the possibilities for democratic societies and egalitarian education lie in spaces of public contestation and encounter. Rancière sees the democratic project as fundamental to what we know as politics itself: "Democracy, in the sense of the power of the people, the power of those who have no special entitlement to exercise power, is the very basis of what makes politics thinkable...it is the wrench of equality jammed (objectively and subjectively) into the gears of domination, it's what keeps politics from simply turning into law enforcement" (Agamben et al. 79). For the public realm to not just be a system of power and domination the illegitimate must make themselves heard. Democracy and education have little to do with the brand value that their empty symbols have garnered and everything to do with contesting those who attempt to employ them as such.

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