

NEOLIBERAL SILENCES, RACE, & THE HOPE OF CRT

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INTRODUCTION

In an article set to appear in the Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies journal, Dr. Luis Miron and I forwarded the concepts of federalization and militarization to frame the events occurring immediately after the drowning of the Crescent City. Yet, as the city attempts to rise and begin anew, the forces that drove those dual concepts continues to limit and stifle the possibilities for what a new New Orleans *could* be. In our assessment, federalization, is a process whereby federal authority, with its access to greater resources and overall know-how, both assists and in some cases supercedes local and state governance bodies in responding to events and emergency situations the magnitude of a terrorist attack or a devastating natural disaster. On the other hand, militarization is a process of utilizing the repressive arm of the state (i.e.: the military or police) to implement martial law in attempts to efficiently and systematically gain order and compliance to the will of the state.

Both of these processes, which we discussed in great detail through the perspective and representations developed by major news outlets reporting the response to Katrina, were greatly influenced and shaped by the forces of neoliberalism. In fact, the intent of “Drowning the Crescent City: The told stories of Katrina”, was not to chronicle what went wrong, but simply what happened in the words of the (primarily administrative) actors involved and the interpretations of major media outlets closest to the disaster and response (the New York Times and Times-Picayune). Neoliberalism (Apple 2001, Giroux 2004, Harvey 2001, Peters 2001) is particularly salient to the current context of struggle in New Orleans. This ideology is a way of thinking about society as it relates to class, major public and private institutions, and how individuals think of themselves as social actors. A primary aspect of neoliberalism is the general consensus to let the market be the ultimate authority of social worth. Characteristic of this logic are the process of depoliticization and decontextualization that mask inequality and power differentials from those who do not benefit from social transactions produced through neoliberal thought.

For the purposes of this discussion, in order to highlight these processes of depoliticization and decontextualization masking inequality in the practice of neoliberal logics I will shift from discussing the practices of federalization and militarization to the role of schooling in the same region. Beside the historical lens through which I view the context and conditions of neoliberal practices for their emergences, developments, and sustenance of white supremacist logics and practices, it is important to also engage both local and macrostructural approaches to analyzing the neoliberal project as it takes shape in New Orleans. Again via major news outlets, the emphasis of school reform in New Orleans is on individual performance of both students and teachers instead of on wider economic and political considerations and continuing historical trends.

This article will take a look at one place where globalization has taken its toll on the local economy, and education coupled with this conceptualization of doing “the heavy lifting” has been presented to the citizens as an answer. The city is New Orleans, Louisiana, and the concept driving the loss of jobs, school as the great legitimator in U.S society, and the responsibility of our citizens to put the pieces of their shattered lives back together is called neoliberalism.

GOVERNMENTALITY AND EDUCATION REFORM

Over the past year and a half a number of scholars, documentaries, authors, reporters, and individuals on the ground have weighed in on the events before and after the 2005 devastation of New Orleans. More specifically, the gaze of the nation has currently fallen upon Orleans Parish to glimpse an unprecedented experiment in education reform with political implications of global proportions. Such a drastic assault on public education comes in light of statements that, "We continue to raise our standards, and our schools continue to rise to our higher expectations, and I am very proud of that (Waller, 2005, 1)." by Governor Kathleen Blanco. And, "this is the first time in my memory that Orleans met or exceeded the state's growth, and it's very, very exciting (Waller, 2005, 1)," by Secondary Education (BESE) member Leslie Jacobs, just months before the hurricane cleared the city.

After the storm passed, clearing the city of its residents and all of its major institutions along with them, it's the winds of change and opportunity swirling about the parish receiving press and attention. Charter schools are nothing new to urban education reform as an alternative or supplement to traditional schools systems. Charter school reform has been accused in the past of being a move to dissemble the traditional public institutions for market based, business model institutions. However, what is significant in the context of New Orleans (or anywhere in the country for that matter) is for traditional schools to serve a minority population outside the control and direction of the local school board where charter schools outnumber the traditional institutions. This situation was presented to public as being a fortuitous circumstance of Hurricane Katrina allowing for what has been heralded as innovation and creativity in the education reform process (Gurwitt 2006, Snell 2006, Waldman 2007).

Neoliberalism is a concept that casts a wide net of theory and ideology. It falls under the rubric of a political theory that has implications not only for large social systems and global politics, but also for the political economy of interpersonal and symbolic relationships. In speaking of theory, it is important to note that contrary to the way that theory is used in the course of everyday conversation, it is not employed here as a guess or an assumption. Instead,

theory as it is used here reflects “a set of logically coherent, interrelated concepts that attempts to explain some observable phenomena (1994, 17).”

New Orleans, once America’s land of the looking glass of political relationships and living metaphor of contested contradiction. Whereas the rhetoric of America’s melting pot ideal of the culturally homogeneous society fails to ring true for a majority of North American locales, New Orleans once stood alone as the sterling exemplar of America’s cultural milieu. Instead, New Orleans, or the Crescent City as it has come to be known for its geographic layout, is representative of the loftier notions of the intermarrying of cultural identities and practices. What is however problematic, and as of recent date even more so recognized as such, is how in light of this cultural amalgamation ideological though as it concerns race and class continue to produce social stratification and blatant social inequality. Given the current development of New Orleans as a metaphor of social dysfunction, the inherent consequences of racial and class conflict following hurricane Katrina and the ensuing drowning of the city by manmade flood eviscerate the inherent contradiction of the “American dream”.

Michael Peters (2001) has outlined twelve tenets of “governmentality” which he discerns as extended from the work of Michael Foucault. Governmentality is a direct reference to the “art of government” and exacerbates government power’s connection with liberalism as the critique of state reason. This has left the notion of government as a mentality, in contrast to its role as an administrative arm, which primarily aims to limit the role of government to practices connected with limiting the scope and reach of the state.

As stated previously, depoliticization and decontextualization under neoliberalism assume the role of the “degovernmentalization” of the state. This task focuses on the development of using the market to govern by promoting consumer-driven forms of public services such as education, health care, and other social provisions (also referred to as the ‘welfare state’). The development of a district of schools as a solution to New Orleans “failing” school district embodies the tenets of governmentality at every level and in every step of the process. Neoliberalism utilizes a classical liberal ideology as a critique of state reason. The state is to be self-limiting including the role of government as it is related to the limits of state reason,

power, etc. As such, Post Katrina, the Orleans Parish schools are characterized as not only a hodgepodge of state-governed schools, and privately managed charter schools, but also a buffet of educational choice:

The destruction, terrible as it was, may prove to be the salvation of a school district that had been drowning for years (Newmark & DeRugy, 2006, 13).

Parents somehow managed to navigate their choices without mass chaos, and now one of America's pre-eminent cities is getting a dose of educational liberty. All it took was a hurricane (Snell, 2006, 8).

Today there are approximately 55 public schools open in New Orleans, with a total capacity to serve 34,000 students. That's slightly more than ½ the enrollment pre Katrina. The New Orleans public school district is in control of only five public schools in New Orleans, the state is operating 17 schools through its "Recovery District," and the remaining 29 are independent, quasi-private charter schools. The state and private organizations such as the accounting firm of Alvarez and Marsal are in control of most of the city's 55 operating public schools. Although the widely held conception is that community groups and parents control charter schools, truly it is the illusion of autonomy and choice that has succeeded here. The state still maintains control of public education via rules and policies, though it seems to have relinquished its bureaucratic mechanisms and structures to both private and quasi-private entities. The accomplishment here is clearly the feat of dismantling the local teacher's union for sole control of public education in New Orleans and creating the neoliberal construct of government at a distance.

The state takeover of 107 underperforming schools, and increasing proliferation of charter schools are based on a business model of educational model favoring balanced budgets, budget surpluses, and business oversight of policy making, especially as this concerned the hiring and firing of principals and teachers and outsourcing physical plant services. In many ways if successful over the long term, these efforts threaten the very idea of public education, as scholars have understood this concept historically. In particular these values will not serve the city's poor minority and physically handicapped children well. The intent here, though inflammatory, is a conscious effort *not* to serve traditionally disenfranchised and oppressed

groups specifically. Instead, neoliberal ideology seeks cultural reconstruction as a deliberate policy goal, developing a national curriculum of competition and enterprise via privatization of the public sector and public services. It depoliticizes and decontextualizes with the rise of the notion of an “enterprise society” which, ignores historical neglect and systematic oppression via supplanting the political and the social with the concerns of the economic.

In the place of striving towards notions of democratic education and equality amongst all schools regardless of geography and ethnic makeup, there exists the tension of natural versus contrived forms of the market. This refers to an emphasis of the market as a cultural product and constitutional perspective focusing on the judicial and legal (2001, 21) rules through which the game of enterprise can be engaged. As it applies to public education, rules such as Act 35 have set the parameters for how commerce is allowed to operate when the parents and students become consumers of investments in an educational product in the growing marketplace that is now New Orleans Public Schools.

Act 35 was passed in order to redefine the scope of the recovery school district (RSD) from the terms outlined in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Schools that traditionally performed well on the annual aptitude performance tests and made the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) but had missed the designated score that year were to be taken over. Those schools that had shown significant improvement in 2005 and the previous years but had not reached the designated score were also to be taken over. Act 35 was a fast tracking of the NCLB laws that indicated that after four years of a school’s failure to reach AYP, the state would assume the responsibility of running that particular school. Furthermore, the Act specified that any alternative school associated with a failing school was also to be included in the RSD, a stipulation not included in the original laws but would in effect widen the scope of the RSD properties and power. To set up a series of schools able to operate outside of the bureaucracy of the school system and contested terrain of the local school board would be in the New Orleans business elite’s best economic interest. In addition, the State of Louisiana Department of Education memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would also establish a policy agreement between the state, the Orleans Parish School Board, and the NOPS superintendent to create the

parameters of economic management of the schools which would further open schools to market relationships.

Neoliberalism conceptualizes the market beyond simple exchange mechanism to include “all processes of voluntary agreement among persons (2001, 21).” Under this logic, schools are placed in the global marketplace to be consumed, marketed, and packaged like any other product for sale. The State of Louisiana has seemed to create “the most market-driven system in the United States (Gewertz, October 19, 2005).” Here, no student is required to attend a neighborhood school, for purposes of competition this concept has been eliminated completely. The replacement of “community” for “the social” as exemplified through disregarding the concept of neighborhood schools correlates to the movement of power, authority, and responsibility from a central location (the government via local institutions) squarely onto the shoulders of individuals (principals, teachers, and students). This process redefines our conceptions of the public as distinct from those of the private.

Students symbolically represent currency equaling the value of what the state spends to school them for one year. When the student picks whichever school they want to attend, they are literally spending their money, voting, and participating in the democratic process via consumption. Should the students not be happy with the product they received, they are granted a satisfaction guarantee that allows them to consume another educational product. To this end, schools are only paid for the students that they service, which as a result, makes the educational marketplace more competitive for teachers and principals. “The bottom line: schools have to compete for students, and I believe this will make them more responsive (Leslie Jacobs in Gewertz, October 19, 2005).”

The relation between government and self-government as viewed through a classical liberal ideological perspective presents government as a community of autonomous, self-regulating individuals. This is largely premised on a notion of “*homo economicus*”, which dictates that individuals be treated as utility maximizers in all of their behaviors. *Homo economicus* assumes that all people at heart are self-interested, rational, and wish to be autonomous agents. “In other words, individuals are modeled as seeking to further their own

interests, defined in terms of measured net wealth positions, in politics as in other aspects of their behavior (2001, 119).” Market ideology or simply, the ideology of the marketplace, extends to all aspects of social life in neoliberalism. It operates so that capitalism is extended to the running of our social institutions, social interactions, and narrows our democratic worldview to the least common denominator, the individual. Through this ideological lens, democratic agency is expressed through individual practices of producing and consuming (though mostly consuming). This view champions the restriction of government involvement in the lives of individuals save for (1) protection from coercion (national defense) (2) protection of individuals from other individuals in society (criminal justice) (3) the provision of public goods; and (4) the protection of those unable to make free choices of their own (2000, 20).

Market ideology via the neoliberal approach dictates that public education is served best by vouchers and their more affable counterpart, charter schools. Each sponsors a new relationship between government and management at the local school level, giving rise to the shift from administration and policy to management of individuals and entities. This is accomplished by placing teachers and principals on performance contingent contracts, which by virtue of the mechanism of standardized tests combined with educator performances also extends to students themselves.

The myth that parents and students are uniquely special in all this—that the schools are somehow supposed to be what parents and students want them to be—goes hand-in-hand with the myth of local control, and it is equally misleading. The proper constituency of even a single public school is a huge and heterogeneous one whose interests are variously represented by politicians, administrators, and groups at all levels of government. Parents and students are but a small part of this constituency (Chubb & Moe, 1990, 31).

Schools fighting to attract “customers” (read: parents and students) with radio and television advertising campaigns, and roadside signs pitching the benefits of their programs in New Orleans were emblematic of a greater truth. This truth was painful for local constituents before the hurricane forced national attention and dialogues, and will be even more painful after this drastic restructuring, “the public schools are *not meant* to be theirs to control and are literally *not supposed* to provide them with the kind of education they might want (Chubb & Moe, 1990,

32).” Even though the New Orleans Times-Picayune told parents: "Think of yourselves as consumers in a brand new marketplace (Snell, 2006, 8),” a democratic education (or even an education equal to those in the wealthy suburbs surrounding the city) was nowhere to be found on the menu.

MARKET IDEOLOGY, EDUCATION, & RACE

Neoliberalism fosters an economic theory of democracy. The idea is that democracy is commodified at the price of political liberalism, subordinating the state to the market. Highlighting the parallel between economic and political markets. Neoliberal policy in the development of charter schools does not create an “equal playing field”, in contrast, by undoing the memory of past discrimination, and unseating our historical consciousness of institutional discrimination it seeks to overlook civic values in the interest of developing commercial interests. The need through actualizing the academic function of education to place individuals in the division of labor and integrate them into the workforce (distributive and economic functions of education) takes precedent for charters and is disconnected from concepts of the social, justice, or civic responsibility. As such, colorblindness negates relationships between racial difference and power. The danger in such an ideological approach to educational policy and other implications is that the “rhetoric of color-blindness is commonly used as a pretext to continue to justify hierarchical racial divisions (Parker, 2003, 150).”

Though market ideology virtually ignores notions of race, the history of racialization and discrimination in both the national and New Orleans context are implicit in every facet of the restructuring process. Through a shift in focus from individual actors or governing bodies determining school structures to the market as the primary delineator, power is “uncoupled from matters of ethics and social responsibility (Giroux, 2004, 59).” Thus, social responsibility is shifted from the state and those governing bodies onto the poor and oppressed groups and historical discriminatory policies and treatments forgotten. Under the neoliberal approach to education through charter schools, market ideology replaces longstanding social contracts that sought equality and opportunities that public schools were hoped to one day fulfill. The chartering of public education is representative of a much larger effort that is deeply ingrained in

America's racial consciousness, in whiteness, and in the new left's attempts to position class over the legacy of racialization in America. Market ideology is the triumph of capital over politics as well as morality. It is the triumph of economic logic over all other domains of human existence, and therefore represents the end of history (Giroux 2004).

The promotion of a new relationship between government and knowledge: the development of new forms of social accounting and expertise (via technological advances) to promote notions of government at a distance. The notion of educational reform for "equal educational opportunity" finds little material import and is purely ideological at best. Major criticism levied on both reform movements since the mid 1950's and research such as the landmarks studies of the *Coleman Report* and the work of Jencks, and Bowles and Gintis are extensive in scope. Of particular interest are that reforms and research to this end were all results based with a primary focus on individualism, competition, and meritocracy. Also, the ideological stance of "equal educational opportunity" concentrates too heavily on site based reform, choosing to view schools as autonomous instead of as closely tied to the wider society of racial segregation mechanisms, the labor market, and the state itself. Finally, the too little consideration in reform language considers the question of what education is and seeks to accomplish, besides being viewed as purely functional (Burbules & Sherman 1979).

This is to say that without reform addressing past discrimination by way of race and class then reform initiatives are not only still inequitable and unequal but still in fact discriminatory. Particularly through reform initiatives using market ideology, but also in discussions of educational equity in general, too little attention is paid to the fact that American public education "depends heavily on local property taxes, and inequalities in tax revenues among school districts produce inequalities in educational resources, facilities, programs, and opportunities (Walters, 2001, 44)." Whereas the federal response is for local and state governance to turn to market ideology to solve the questions of equal educational opportunities, particularly in urban districts, what ends up occurring is that the market ideology approach to education veils how racial histories accrue political, economic, and cultural weight to the power of whiteness. This occurs simply by virtue of refusal to acknowledge it. As a final point from the establishment of common schools in the early 19th century to the market approach to

education in the present day, “racial inequality in educational funding and other forms of educational opportunity were explicit policies of the state throughout the country (Anderson, 2001, 35).”

What the market approach to educational reform offers to Whites and the power structures driving these reforms is the belief that the concept of institutional racism have no merit. It legitimates the idea that America has achieve a “level playing field” and as such privileges in education and economic opportunities that Whites enjoy are due to individual “determination, a strong work ethic, high moral values, and a sound investment in education (Giroux, 2004).” This ideological standpoint leaves Whites and the elite free and clear, absolving them from feeling any sense of responsibility to rebuild the physical infrastructure of American schools. This task proves critical for sustaining a high-quality learning environment for those students who have been cheated from such opportunities. This leaves millions of students in need of decent facilities and educational opportunities, especially in urban areas, and in a strange twist of fate, only themselves to blame for the conditions in which they exist (Anderson, 2005, 133).”

CRT IMPLICATIONS for INTERROGATING RACISM

CRT’s connection to qualitative studies in education can be defined as a framework-or a set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy-that seeks to identify, analyze and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the subordination of students of color (Parker 2003, 152).

In a 2005 article, Gloria Ladson-Billings and Jamel Donnor investigate what they have termed “the call” or “that moment at which, regardless of one’s stature and/or accomplishments, race (and categories of otherness) is recruited to remind one that he or she still remains locked in the racial construction.” They continue in their discussion of its effects stating that it is “mobilized to maintain the power dynamic and hierarchical racial structures of society (2005, 280).” As they describe it, “the call” occurs on an interpersonal level, though sometimes operating through the use of organizational structural mechanisms. It is through the receipt of “the call” and acknowledgement of its function that scholarship and individuals in everyday

lived experiences are able to identify such social constraints and pratfalls in order to properly address and navigate them.

It is the proposal of this research that such a concept be embraced but also turned outward so as to call to the fore inequitable social mechanisms and institutions with particular negligible impact on communities (racialized and “othered”). This is significant in keeping “honest” the race-neutral rhetoric of neoliberal market-based policy and function. Such policy which champions objectives such as the individualism of classic liberalism and values of meritocracy refuse to address systemic affects of historical oppression and blatant inequality made glaringly apparent after the breach of the levees in New Orleans.

A critical race theory (CRT) framework places race as the central unit of analysis and attacks liberalism and the inherent belief in the law to create an equitable and just society (2003, 149). Flying in the face of neoliberal ideology and policy, one of the main tenets of CRT continues to hold that while classical racism may have subsided, everyday racism has and continues to rise (2003, 149). Particularly considering the context of New Orleans and the shifting focus from traditionally underserved communities to viewing the individual student as a utility maximizer, it is important to engage a critical race methodology here to expose the flaws of the color-blind view of everyday social relations. The rhetoric of color-blindness pretends to ignore the impact on social perceptions, status, and identity of all societal members that socialized notions of racial categories have; and is commonly used as a pretext to continue justifying those hierarchical racial divisions (2003, 150).

Given the critical race-based positions that were developed in other fields, its coupling with CRT has given the theory expanding explanatory power to address the myriad elements of race, its role in shaping law and the nation state, personal and group identity, distribution of goods and services, and institutional practices and policies. Since its inception, CRT has not lock itself into a singular line of criticism against the law and society regarding race (Hayman, 1995).

This notion of government at a distance through market ideology and charter schools does not divorce us from the necessity of interrogating why, how, and for what purposes do educational institutions reinforce racial, class, and gender inequality for students of color (2003,

152). Regardless of the limited autonomy of charter schools, standard approaches to educational policy are still the normative. The policy process has been typically defined as a series of decisions regarding actions taken in terms of what to do, decisions on how to do it, and decisions on how to assess outcomes through assessment and evaluation (Lee, 1998) (2003, 154). CRT tells us that although these areas are seemingly distinct, the policy process remains interconnected, and decisions made in one vector process will have an effect on the other domains (2003, 154-5). The complex realities of policymaking in education, which would include showing how influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, error, and pragmatism all play a role in the policy process. Furthermore, we need to criticize the illusion of the “neat and superficial” way that the policy process has been presented; surely, the policy process in education is “messy” (p.9) (155).

Simply put, given that CRT views racism as a central part of how society is organized and governed, it helps explain and illustrate how and why racism is accepted and taken for granted by White society (2003, 156). However, when one examines the impact of these policies over the long term, their combined effect is to provide minorities with an inferior education that the majority of Americans would neither tolerate nor accept for their own children (2003, 157). In the case of neoliberal policies and rhetoric, race, racialism, and racism play a role in determining policy design, implementation, and particularly outcomes by simply pretending that they don't exist.

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