

THE CORPORATE–MILITARY– GOVERNMENTAL MILIEU

BRAD J. PORFILIO

California State University, East Bay

DEREK R. FORD

Syracuse University

This chapter explores how the contemporary corporate–military–governmental milieu impacts developments within U.S. K–12 schools and society. A critical examination of the contemporary corporate–military–governmental milieu is essential for becoming educated, empowered, and free in a Freirian sense (Freire, 1970) to understand the constitutive forces and structures responsible for breeding oppression and injustice in our daily affairs, as well as to recognize the urgency to become active in the struggle for building socially just schools, institutions, and relationships. Although politicians, government officials, and the corporate elite have supported and promulgated corporate and military imperatives in U.S. schools for about 2 centuries (e.g., schools across the United States in 1832 purchased McGuffey Readers from publishing houses; the National Defense Act of 1916 authorized high schools to hire military personnel as educators; and large-scale corporations made hundreds of thousands of dollars of test sales by the mid-1950s), there has been an exponential rise in corporate and military involvement in PK–12 U.S. educational institutions over the past 25 years or so.

Many scholars pinpoint corporate and military ascendancy over schools and society to the changing

face of capitalism (Hursh, 2011; McLaren, 2015; Saltman, 2003). Political, economic, and educational powerbrokers in industrial societies such as the United States and Canada have supported neoliberal ideologies espoused by pro-capital academics, such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, for improving all segments of social life. Unfortunately, over the past 25 years, the support for “unregulated or free markets, the withering away of the state as government’s role in regulating businesses and funding social services are either eliminated or privatized, and encouraging individuals to become self-interested entrepreneurs” (Hursh, 2011, p. 35) has denigrated rather than improved the human condition. For instance, neoliberal capitalism is inextricably tied to creation of the prison-industrial complex, to a maldistribution of resources and income, to increased childhood poverty, to massive unemployment, and to educational inequalities along the lines of class and race.

It should be noted that support for free-market ideals as a basis for developing policies, practices, and initiatives in social institutions has functioned as propaganda for the state to cede power to corporate powerbrokers. For instance, in the United States, government officials have acted at the behest of the

corporations and facilitated the corporate takeover of such social domains as health care, transportation, postcatastrophe restoration (e.g., restoration work after Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Katrina), parks, water, digital networks, and education. Furthermore, international organizations and Western governmental leaders have wielded their power when corporate control is threatened or when the very economic system that supports the exploitation of labor is challenged. For instance, this dynamic is witnessed in the U.S. government implementing the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) in 2008. TARP was designed to rescue financial institutions and as an economic system that promulgated an “industry wide scam that involved the mass sale of mismarked, fraudulent mortgage-backed securities” (Taibbi, 2011).

During this same period of time, the U.S. government and business leaders have supported militarism to compel global citizens to support neoliberal ideologies. For instance, U.S. corporate leaders and government officials have used advanced technology and military formations to extend neoliberal policies across the Middle East (Schwartz, 2011). U.S. military invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan provided the impetus for U.S. business leaders and government officials to rebuild these countries through neoliberal economic reforms (Schwartz, 2011).

Moreover, U.S. government’s continued support of militarism aids the corporate world’s desire to amass wealth, control labor power and resources, and concentrate power. The U.S. Department of Defense “manages a global real property portfolio that consists of more than 555,000 facilities . . . located on over 5,000 sites worldwide and covering over 28 million acres” (2012, p. 2). The United States maintains 666 military sites in foreign countries (p. 23). The U.S. military budget doubled from 1998 to 2008. Funding for the military was projected to account for approximately 17% of the total federal budget in fiscal 2014 and 57% of the discretionary budget, or the spending that lawmakers decide on each year in the appropriations process (NPP, 2013). The U.S. government has also supported corporations and backed military incursions by privatizing elements of warfare. Private military and security companies have been invested with the power to move “weapons and military equipment” as well as to provide “services for military operations recruiting

former militaries as civilians to carry out passive or defensive security” (Gomez del Prado, 2014).

Military spending is also increasing across Western Europe, as new wars are being waged. Many of these wars are more “traditional,” such as the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. In these wars, certain nations (including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Italy) bombed and invaded sovereign countries to overthrow their governments. Yet many of these powers have also been involved in what we might call “proxy wars,” in which they placed limited numbers of military personnel on the ground and worked to support proxy forces. This was the script that was followed in the 2011 war on Libya. In that war, Belgium, France, Denmark, Italy, the United States, Norway, Qatar, Spain, and other states provided air and intelligence support, weapons and money, and justification for a grouping of rebels that ultimately—and thanks only to foreign intervention—overthrew the sovereign government of Libya.

In addition to external wars and military operations, we also have to take into account the *internal* militarization that takes place in countries such as the United States. A prime and recent example of this intensification is the U.S. support for militarizing police. There are numerous federal programs that supply local police departments with “excess” military-grade equipment such as assault weapons and surveillance cameras and training from the Department of Defense. As a result, local police and sheriff’s departments are now equipped with mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles. Military tanks accompany police on special weapons and tactics raids. The militarization of the police was on full display with the repression of the Ferguson (Missouri) protests in late 2014. Police officers rode in tanks, dressed in camouflage, and carried assault rifles replete with sniper scopes that were modeled on the M4 carbine assault rifle. They wore body armor and carried over half a dozen rounds of extra ammunition on their body. Looking at the images of these police officers, it was difficult for viewers to tell if they had been deployed in Ferguson or Mosul (Iraq).

The increased impact of commercial imperatives and military ideologies on daily affairs in the broader society has also shaped the nature of PK–12 schooling in the United States. According to Peter McLaren

(2012), during the 1980s, U.S. government officials' support of market-driven educational reforms went into "full swing" with the "voucher movement" supporting government-funded certificates permitting parents to send their child to the school of their choice (p. 40) and when business leaders made vouchers become "a reality" by running charter schools. Over the past 25 years, U.S. government officials have supported corporate CEOs' desire to implement corporate policies and formations to allegedly "solve" problems impacting PK–12 schools. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandated schools across the United States to institute high-stakes examinations and led many of them to adopt test preparation materials, which were produced by such corporate giants as McGraw-Hill and Pearson, to allegedly position teachers and students in "low performing schools to work harder" and increase student learning by "tying negative consequences (e.g., public exposure, external take over) to standardized" testing (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012, p. 1). Market-based reform is now reflected in almost every element in schooling, including financing school construction, managing day-to-day activities, training school personnel and educators, assessing student performance, developing school curricula, advertising products and selling services, and promulgating school policies by controlling school boards. Furthermore, the Obama administration instituted Race to the Top (RTT) in 2009, a \$4.35-billion "competitive incentive program" designed to push more and more state officials to implement such market-driven reforms as charter schools, privatized teacher certification programs, high-stakes testing, and test-driven accountability (Carr & Porfilio, 2011).

U.S. government officials have also supported instituting militaristic formations alongside market-driven reform initiatives. For instance, the state has backed schools to engage in a billion-dollar market with the corporate world through the purchase of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, privatized security forces, and boot camp programs. The corporate world has touted these reforms as methods to stop violence and to make students responsible citizens. In reality, as Kenneth Saltman (2003) posited, militarized public schooling is another avenue to give power to the corporate world. It allows corporations to enact their vision of education, to amass

wealth, and to strip educators' professional autonomy and expertise for honing students' ability to understand themselves in relationship to the world.

Militarized schooling also is designed to position students, particularly low-income students and students of color, to become dutiful citizens who are complicit in supporting the U.S. military and its agenda to globalize capitalism overseas. Since the passage of NCLB, military recruiters also have had access to primary and secondary school students. These schools can also be required to provide contact information for students if requested by the U.S. military. Students' parents must opt out if they wish to be exempt from such requests. As of 2013, more than 500,000 students were enrolled in JROTC programs in 3,400 U.S. high schools (Jones, 2013), which are predominantly located in poor rural and urban communities, particularly in the South. Specifically targeting oppressed and economically disadvantaged students, these programs promise college tuition and other funding. For instance, a magnet, highly selective and competitive high school in Chicago had seven military recruiter visits and 150 from university recruiters. In juxtaposition, in a neighborhood school whose students were 80% Latino/a, the ratio was almost even: nine military recruiter visits and 10 visits from college recruiters (Reed, 2005).

U.S. students have been *inculcated* to embrace the U.S. military's agenda, since there has been a constant influx of military personnel teaching in school and serving as school administrators. Military weaponry has also become part of the fabric of school life. For instance, school districts in San Diego and Los Angeles, California, received MRAP vehicles through the Department of Defense's "Excess Property" program, also referred to as the 1033 Program. A letter sent to the Department of Defense by a coalition of community and legal groups—including the NAACP—discussed about two dozen school districts in eight states that received military surplus equipment from the program (NAACP, 2014). One school district in Florida purchased 28 M16 assault rifles through the program (Gartner, 2014).

Contemporary Concerns

One of the most remarkable achievements of the corporatization and militarization of education has

been the cleaving of politics and education. The nexus between education and politics has always been a central concern and debate for educators, educational theorists, researchers, and policy makers, dating back to Socrates and Plato. Yet contemporary discourse around education—and this is not just limited to the discourse pulsing through the corporate mass media, but includes teacher education programs, professional educational organizations, and academic publishing outlets—is predicated upon the very severance of education from the political.

Instead of political concerns over values, directions, goals, and purposes, educational debates are increasingly staged in a highly abstracted economic register. Gert Biesta (2006) documented problems with this succinctly, writing:

To think of education as an economic transaction not only misconstrues the role of the learner and educator in the educational relationship, it also results in a situation in which questions about the content and purpose of education become subject to the forces of the market instead of being the concern of professional judgment and democratic deliberation. (p. 31)

Thus, recent transformations in education have altered our very subjectivity. Instead of being educators who have knowledges, experiences, and *critical ideas* to bring to students, teachers are viewed as service providers, as technicians whose only job is to deliver content as efficiently as possible. On the other side of the educational relationship, students and parents are no longer conceived of as citizens who are connected to a public realm. Instead, they are positioned as consumers.

With the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and accountability mechanisms, the very act of teaching is under attack. Many teachers today have little agency when it comes to determining what their students should know, how they should learn it, and when they should engage the material. Instead, scripted curricula provide overly structured lesson plans with specific time allotments and even word-for-word phrasing for how to speak with students. One of the main problems with this, particularly as regards challenging the corporate–military–government milieu in education, is that critical teachers are either pushed out or fired. They are pushed out if they deviate too much from the script, which can result in their school being designated as “failing” or

“subpar” test scores. Alternatively, they can be outright fired if they vocally or visibly speak out or otherwise contest the corporate privatization and militarization of schooling.

On the other hand, students are increasingly being seen as mere receptacles for information, knowledges, and skills. In this standardized atmosphere, there is no room for students to emerge as unique and singular beings (Biesta, 2006, 2009). In other words, students are not seen as active agents in the learning process or as individuals with distinct perspectives and knowledges to bring into the classroom and the learning experience.

School administration is also profoundly changed in this environment. Saltman (2010) wrote about the ways in which corporate and military logics have changed educational leadership. Looking at groups such as the Eli Broad Foundation, Saltman observed that educational leaders and administrators are now seen as CEOs. Further, in this context “military leadership is celebrated for its alleged link with corporate management—a focus on discipline, order, and enforcement of mandates through a hierarchy at every level of public schooling” (p. 81).

Taken together, these trends are of particular import at the moment because they are working to widen educational inequalities. Oppressed racial groups, the working class, and poor people are disproportionately affected by the militarization and privatization of education. This means that those who are in the most need of education are those who receive the worst education: scripted curricula, grueling standardized testing, test-polluted educators, surveillance, and discipline. This latest trend is particularly worrisome to many because of its contradiction of a democratic ethos. In 2013, the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, released a report documenting the overuse of suspension in middle and high schools in the United States. Over two million students were suspended during the 2009–2010 school year, the vast majority of whom were suspended for minor infractions such as school dress code violations or disruptive behavior. Youth of color are suspended at a much higher rate than White students: Black students are suspended at a rate of 24.3%, while the rate for White students is 7.1% (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Not only, then, is the contemporary moment one of declining educational attainment, but it is also one of increasing educational

inequality that is exacerbating power differences along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ability.

Contexts

War has become a seemingly permanent, all-encompassing phenomenon of the contemporary world (Vidal, 2002). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005) wrote, "War is becoming a general phenomenon, global and interminable" (p. 3). What this means is not only that there are currently dozens of wars raging on all continents with the exception of maybe Antarctica (although this will depend on our definition of *war*) but also that war has permeated all aspects of life. Consider, for example, the ways in which the language of war frames so many areas of our daily lives: Pat Benatar sings about love as a "battlefield"; football lexicon includes talk of "blitzing"; and some business ventures are referred to as "hostile takeovers"; when U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson led an effort to reduce poverty, he called it a "war on poverty." Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to go through a day without encountering war either directly or indirectly through a representation.

Given this pervasiveness, education must necessarily exhibit some relationship to war and militarization. That education must engage with war is exacerbated by the fact that education has historically been tightly linked to the nation-state (Spring, 1972). Indeed, education, particularly since the rise of public education with capitalism, has most often been explicitly justified by its ability to produce particular types of citizens and workers for the state and its economy. Historically, one of the most effective ways that governments have legitimated collecting and spending tax revenue on education has been by linking public education to a more productive citizenry, and this includes citizens as workers but also as patriots. Indeed, this is in large part why so many schools begin their day with the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

In order to understand the contemporary nexus of education and the state, military, and corporation, some historical context is needed. We can locate the contemporary state of war and militarization with the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. At this conference,

the world's leading powers at the time (e.g., the United States, Britain, France, Portugal, and Germany) took the map of Africa and divided it among themselves. While the division of the world into colonies by imperialist powers had been going on for decades in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, this conference definitely marked the beginning of the age of imperialism. By 1911, all of Africa was colonized, with the main exception of Ethiopia. Liberia was technically independent, but it was in reality under the domination of the United States. With the world divided between the imperialist powers, wars were fought as inter-imperialist rivalries until the 1940s. World War I, for example, was most immediately triggered by a competition among Russia, Serbia, and Austro-Hungary over which nation would control the Balkans. During the war, the United States, France, and Russia signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was a proposal to divide the Ottoman Empire (which contained much of what is now referred to as the "Middle East") in the case of the Empire's defeat in the war.

By the end of World War II, however, the world scene was entirely different. Most of the imperialist powers—with the major exception of the United States—were devastated by the war. As a result, the former great powers such as Britain, France, and Germany were unable to maintain absolute dominance over their colonies. While the United States stepped up as the major imperialist power, many of the colonies began to be liberated in the period that followed World War II. Many of these newly liberated colonies chose to align not with their former colonizers but with the Soviet Union. Thus, the period from the end of World War II until roughly 1989–1991, when the Soviet Union was dissolved and overthrown, was characterized as the "Cold War." This war was, of course, "cold" only in certain areas at certain times. But the main line of struggle was between imperialism and the Soviet Union. With the Soviet Union off the world stage, the United States began an aggressive attack to reassert control over large portions of the globe. Wars on Iraq, Yugoslavia, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq again, Libya, and Syria were waged.

The imperialist club that was devastated in World War II and then severely weakened by the Soviet Union has successfully regrouped. This is the context in which the contemporary state of permanent war

must be viewed. It also provides an important corrective to the “antiterrorism” justification for so many wars. In other words, it is not the case that the United States invaded and occupied Iraq and Afghanistan to counter any terrorist operations. In fact, before the U.S. invasion, Iraq was a secular nation that would not tolerate any religious fundamentalist grouping operating in the territory. It can be argued that the U.S. war on that country and its support for reactionary rebels in Syria allowed for the growth of al Qaeda and its offspring—the Islamic State of the Levant—that is currently terrorizing so much of the Middle East.

Theory

One of the crucial theoretical tools for understanding the contemporary relationship among corporations, the military, and the government is neoliberalism. At first blush, the term *neoliberalism* refers to an ideology with a broad, evolving, and, at times, contradictory set of *strategies* and *tactics* that have been deployed in and by late industrial-capitalist societies beginning in the 1970s. Uniting these different strategies and tactics is a generalized push to bring everything under and, for that matter, beyond and including the sun under the rule and logic of the market (Ford, 2013). Whatever was once public must now become private. Neoliberalism is, then, as David Harvey (2005) wrote, “a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (p. 22).

This signals a retreat of government from the market in a particular sense. In the theory of neoliberalism, the government is supposed to be “hands-off” completely. However, this is only partially true. On the one hand, government regulations over businesses and corporations are reduced or eliminated. On the other hand, however, the government plays an enormously important role in setting up and enforcing the legal and property requirements of neoliberalism. One of the most relevant examples of this in the United States is the government’s role in opening up education to privatization. The beginning of the neoliberal agenda for education is generally located

with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. Blaming the economic recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s on public schools, this report embedded the goals and purposes of education within a nationalist framework of economic and technological productivity, called for “rigorous” standards and accountability mechanisms and technologies, and placed teachers in the crosshairs of reform efforts, among other things. All of this was done within the Cold War, arms-race crisis rhetoric:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but *it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility*. . . . The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people. . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5)

The unnamed competitors in this report are not only the United States’ inter-imperialist rivals like Britain and Japan but also those such as the Soviet Union. The public school is situated as the cornerstone of the United States’ economic and social success, and this is directly linked to its military success. While this was only a report, it laid the groundwork for RTT, introduced by and passed under the Obama administration as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. RTT is a cash-prize contest that rewards states for falling into line with neoliberal education policies. Paul Carr and Brad Porfilio (2011) delineate several aspects of RTT that help facilitate the privatization of education, or the transfer of capital away from the public and into the hands of corporations and other private interests. First, the program expedites the expansion of charter schools by encouraging states to remove or raise caps on the percentage of charter schools that can operate in the state. Carr and Porfilio note, “New York State passed a law specifically to increase the amount of charter schools in the state, which gave them a better chance to net federal dollars” (p. 11). Charter schools, of course, allow corporations and wealthy individuals to capture federal and state moneys

destined for education through operating the school and exploiting the labor power of nonunionized and precarious teachers and staff. This is particularly true of “for-profit” charter schools, although “nonprofit” charter schools also run on similar logic. Increasingly, charter schools are joining with military and “national security” entities to create “homeland security” schools. One example of this is the collaboration between Innovative Schools and the Delaware Academy of Public Safety and Security.

Forms of Inquiry and Modes of Expression

Many scholars have engaged in qualitative forms of research to understand how the U.S. government’s support of corporate and military formations in PK–12 schools have impacted teaching and learning, teacher and student identity formation, and the lived experience of those who have been impacted by the current schooling milieu. Qualitative researchers have also engaged in historical analysis to uncover why various social actors, including youth, educators, government officials, and community members, were complicit in supporting for-profit educational ventures and military practices to ameliorate educational outcomes for students. Some qualitative researchers have done formal ethnographic studies by immersing themselves within educational settings for extended periods of time so as to gain a mole’s eye view of how school officials, administrators, and educators become impacted by commercial and military imperatives, including high-stakes examinations, charter schools, military recruitment, scripted curricula, and computing software. Other scholars have reflected upon their lived experience through autoethnographic accounts so as to illustrate not only how they have been impacted by commercial and military schooling practices but also how they found cracks amid the status quo and successfully implemented social justice teaching practices, alternative policies, and alternative educational structures. Other scholars have engaged in quantitative research in

order to interrogate the claims made by numerous U.S. politicians, government officials, and corporate leaders that corporate mandates a priori improve student achievement (Nichols et al., 2012).

Philosophical and theoretical inquiry involves rigorously throwing into question the most fundamental concepts, frameworks, and terms used to think about education. For example, Tyson Lewis (2013) has recently questioned the pervasiveness of potentiality in education. The notion that education is about realizing one’s potential is commonplace; it pervades educational rhetoric at all levels of society. Yet, Lewis argues that this insistence on potentiality actually serves to reproduce the current economic, social, and political order by fitting students into that order that is “obsessed with the measure of what someone *can do* in order to fulfill a particular role within the economy” (p. 8) instead of asking how students might resist that order or how students might *be otherwise*.

Postmodern theorists, who continually inquire why there are power differentials and injustices inside and outside of K–12 classrooms, have interrogated the claims made by the dominant powerbrokers and others who support military and corporate imperatives to improve education. For instance, these theorists have challenged numerous educational philanthropists’ and corporate leaders’ contentions that charter schools, high-stakes testing, and STEM education will improve the educational performance of students marginalized by social class and race. Other postmodernists have challenged the dominant narrative that conflates economic power with expertise when it comes to generating educational reforms. They have placed the voices of marginalized students, educators, and other community members at the center of academic discussion in order to illustrate that these social actors have a more profound understanding of how to eliminate educational inequalities as compared with those who wield the most power. In a democratic society, such voices have immense potential to influence the public’s understanding of educational issues as well as to create and implement policy and practices in K–12 schools.

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