

“Power City” Politics & the Building of a Corporate School

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Abstract

In this analysis, we explore the historical, economic, and social conditions that have resulted in the building of “Cyber School.” This high tech “super” institution, featuring a multimedia center, a performing arts wing, a 2,200 seat arena, an Olympic sized swimming pool, sophisticated surveillance equipment, and the use of a laptop for every student, stands in sharp contrast to the urban blight which characterizes most of the post-industrial community in which it was built. A striking feature of this school is that it was built and continues to be financed using private funds from mostly a single corporate entity. Based upon three years of informal observations of town meetings, civic functions, and youth interaction in the city; document analysis of area records, local newspapers, we argue the school may be representative of a larger cultural shift from public investment to a corporate-militarized state, seen in this case in the installation of a police substation, surveillance equipment, zero-tolerance policies, and standardized testing, all structured to make tremendous profit off of low income urban youth.

Keywords: Privatization, Urban Schooling, Low income

On a hot summer day three years ago, “Cyber School,” a brand new 360, 000 square-foot state of the art secondary institution for 2,500 students was opened with much fanfare. From the outside, this high tech “super” school resembles a sleek, modern, glass and metal core. On the inside, the institution features a multimedia center, a performing arts wing, an Olympic sized swimming pool, and the use of a laptop for every student, which stands in sharp contrast to the urban blight which characterizes

most of the post-industrial Northern community in which it was built, an area we call “Power City.”¹ The ribbon-cutting ceremony, which was conducted by the mayor, local and state politicians, educational administrators, and corporate representatives, was well attended by city residents, members of the media, and envious politicians from other cities. Student speakers, a local marching band, and crowds of citizens celebrated the event (Cardinale, 2000; Gedalius, 2000). A striking feature of this school is that it was built and continues to be financed using funds from mostly a single corporate entity.

In the Superintendent’s speech on opening day, “Cyber School” was described as the “wave of the future” for the struggling city. Large sections of this formerly industrial area have been ensnared for decades in the debilitating effects of a post-industrial economy. Following white middle class flight to the suburbs and the movement of African American middle class families to other parts of the country, those left behind, whom are mostly of African descent and poor and working poor members of the dominant culture, suffer from joblessness, and resulting urban decay, high crime, and lack of hope. With the steady decline in property value, the former high school was overcrowded, underfunded, and in need of significant physical repairs (Cyber School Bulletin, 2000; Zernike, 2001).

Not emphasized, or even mentioned in these opening ceremonies, however, was the tremendous profit to be made by the involved corporation. After putting up the total cost of \$73 million for the construction of the school from bonds it issued to private investors, the building is to be leased back to the district at a profit of \$4.8 million dollars per year over the course of thirty years. 83% of yearly payments are contracted to be made by the state and 17% by Power City. As part of the deal, the corporation received a tax write off for the initial investment it brokered and is not taxed for any of the profit. Even after the company roughly splits the yearly dividends with bondholders, the result is staggering profits². In an effort to cut costs, during construction, the company, moreover, was allowed to override state law and contract with non-union vendors. In fact, as Florida is the only state to have a school bond financing law, and Michigan and New Jersey are the only states to permit corporations to construct and lease buildings to school districts, Power City successfully lobbied for exemptions to do both (Walsh, 1997; Cardinale, 1999b).

To our knowledge there are only a handful of schools entirely built and financed by corporations (Roy, 1997; Walsh, 1997; Agron, 2001; Zernike, 2001). In addition to profiting from vulnerable communities in the manner already mentioned, we find the form of corporate partnership considered in this analysis assaults low-income people in other ways. For example, the corporation in this research trades publically on the Dow Jones Industrial. Taken to its logical extension, shares can be purchased with dividends partially generated from tax dollars collected from state residents and low-income people in this city. Upon completion, daily maintenance of the building is now supported by additional corporate influences, designated by smaller contracts. For example, a national fast food chain and beverage company have both signed deals with the district. Even the Superintendent of “Cyber School” is also profiting. He is now on a lecture circuit in which he is being paid \$4000 a booking to discuss how urban schools should emulate the corporate model (Cyber School Bulletin, 2000; Cervantes, & Schulman, 2001; Porfilio, 2002).

In this analysis, we explore the historical, economic, and social conditions that have resulted in the building of “Cyber School.” While currently in the literature, many are excavating the moral and ethical concerns regarding private inroads into public schooling, there is an absence of work on how specific communities become vulnerable to this trend, and to our knowledge, no research in which the case of a completely corporately funded school is examined (e.g. Saltman, 2001; Bracey, 2002). By putting a geographical area under a critical lens, we go beyond providing an ahistorical account of the forces that impact educational policies, outcomes, and reform efforts targeted at urban schools and communities. Echoing several contemporary scholars of urban education, we feel historical inquiry is a vital component in determining how the decisions of powerful political, economic, and social actors, over the course of many decades, have left many American cities and schools dislocated. They are searching to ameliorate problems associated with capitalism, such as poverty, cultural intolerance, and racism (Anyon, 1997; Hall, 2000; Johnson & Span, 2002). Through our examination of Power City’s past, we uncover an understanding as to why corporate leaders targeted this particular city for its for-profit educational venture, and why local politicians desperately, and some argue greedily, grabbed the opportunity. With this exemplar, we attempt to draw attention to those communities in North America which are most vulnerable to the

current neo-liberal corporate agenda of hijacking public schooling for private gain (Hursh & Martina, 2003).

For a long while, we have been closely monitoring the developments of “Cyber School.” Research methods include three years of informal observations of town meetings, civic functions, and youth interaction in the city; document analysis of area records, local newspapers, and other forms of media; historical analysis of city social, economic, and demographic trends; and informal interviews with citizens (Bogden & Biklin, 1992). As in all research, our biographies played a large role in our investigation (e.g. Proweller, 1996; Peshkin, 2000; Hall, 2000). Since all the corporate and local political and educational leaders involved in the building and running of the school appeared to be of the dominant culture, our white middle class status undoubtedly gave us entree to civic events where we seemingly “belonged.” We also spent a lot of time considering and observing the lives of students. The students we concerned ourselves with were seemingly of the dominant culture and African American and from working poor and impoverished backgrounds, which also patterned this work. In addition, we both grew up in post-industrial Northern cities that experienced similar demographic shifts to the community in which we were now immersed. Taken together, all these aspects of our identity profoundly shape our words.

The data we present in this study has led to additional questions which we hope to explore in future research. For example, as articulated by residents during fieldwork, prior to the school’s construction, there were few forums where those in opposition to the corporate contract could express their voices. Instead, according to some, waves of positive stories among politicians and local media created a momentum that was seemingly unstoppable to combat. The significant distrust and concern over the building of the school, however, was and is being expressed by many parents, youth, teachers, and other community members whose voices were and continue to be silenced in the media onslaught. Both these oppositional voices and the pro-corporate media characterizations of the school are the subject of ongoing analysis. We also intend to interview teachers and students and to analyze classroom materials and curriculum-in-use to gauge how youth make meaning in this space.

Privatization and Education

In the United States, much of the literature on privatization and education concerns the rise of vouchers, charter schools, and corporate partnerships (e.g. Levin, 2001; Lubienski, 2001; Peterson & Campbell, 2001; Saltman, 2001; Bracey, 2002; Cookson & Berger, 2002; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Wells, 2002). While corporate influence in schools has always existed, for example, in the textbook industry, “school choice” in its present form may be seen as a product of the Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman inspired free market 1970s-1980s, in which Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan dismantled antitrust laws and pushed policy towards further supporting deregulation and privatization (House, 1998; Spring, 1999). Schools, along with unions etc., were set up as much of the blame for rising unemployment and erosion of workers’ rights. Inflammatory documents such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983), for instance, blamed teachers and schools for producing unskilled, illiterate workers. As argued, because of this, industry was forced to seek out more capable employees in other parts of the world, resulting in the United States losing its place as a global economic and innovative power. While, more accurately, it was significantly cheaper to outsource labor in other parts of the world; industry left to take part in the spoils of deregulation, and schools and teachers were held up as convenient targets. The type of teacher blame seen today which has resulted in entrusting business in the schooling of children through forms of privatization, has underpinnings in these events.

In one form or another, charter schools, vouchers, and corporate partnerships exist throughout the world, and are growing in number. Charter schools, for instance, have expanded in popularity, and operate in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America. In the case of the United States, the first charter school opened in 1990 in Minnesota, and as the year 2000 began, there were 1,700 charter institutions nationwide, most of them in low-income communities (Engel, 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Murphy & Shiffman, 2000; Fusarelli, 2001). Vouchers exist in many countries, with the most comprehensive programs in Chile and several cities in the United States. Tuition tax credits, which are similar to vouchers, also are an option soon to be implemented in parts of Canada (Fenlon, 2002; Mallan, 2002).

Private entities are increasingly “donating” money and equipment to schools, particularly underfunded schools, in exchange for advertising rights in the form of corporate partnerships. In this way, as argued by Saltman (2001), companies such as IBM, Cisco Systems, Coca-Cola, Citibank, and McDonald’s are framed as benefactors of public schooling, much of it aimed towards low income youth of color, while in truth, they are promoting images and products to students through legalized contracts. As Saltman explains (2001), these are the same entities that lobby for government cutbacks in social spending to schools, parks, and libraries; and demand for corporate tax breaks, weakening of environmental laws, and the erosion of workers’ rights. These companies, according to Bracey (2002), actually drain significantly higher revenue from public schooling and services than they claim to “give” through partnerships. Underfunded schools, populated by youth from culturally dominated groups and low income students of the dominant culture, are left scrambling for a handful of contracts. With this trend, many have argued (for instance, Saltman, (2001); Bracey, (2002); Giroux, (2003); McLaren & Farahmandpur, (2003)) education increasingly becomes something the private sector bestows on the select deserving through philanthropy, rather than a human right or a public good.

That corporations are allowed to market to and profit off particularly low income youth is a question rarely raised in the popular media. While media critique of charter schools is surfacing in terms of test scores, for the most part, serious inequities in public school funding which forces some to seek out alternatives, is not addressed. As of this writing, the United States Supreme Court ruled educational vouchers can be used by youth to attend religious schools. In response, serious and important concerns about the challenge to constitutional separation of church and state have been nationally articulated. Again, in the media, the underlying conditions which resulted in profound inequalities among public schools is not regularly questioned, nor is the fact that by enacting a voucher system, public tax dollars will be drained from already underfunded schools (Robertson, 1999; Howell & Peterson, 2002; McDonald, 2002). Just recently, the Los Angeles county school district voted to ban the sale of soft drinks on school grounds, with the contention that such sales contribute to adolescent obesity. While certainly an issue that deserves discussion, critique has yet to be extended to the fundamental notion of whether corporations should be allowed to

create product loyalty among school children in the first place (Boyles, 1998; Giroux, 1999; Molnar & Morales, 2000; Kohn & Shannon, 2002; Macedo & Tamir, 2002).

While privatization of public schooling has infiltrated public education in urban, suburban, and rural communities, based upon our research at “Cyber School,” we argue the aims of contracts tend to be quite different based upon the social class and racial identities of students, and whether they are urban and suburban. Corporate contracts in white suburban areas typically involve giving students who attend decently funded schools “more” to help them prepare for a successful future. In contrast, in urban communities populated by poor and working class members of the dominant culture and those from culturally dominated groups, privatization is often positioned as a way to save money and an opportunity to give students a chance to help themselves. In the case of Power City, these were the main two arguments used to “convince” the public to partake in this partnership (Cardinale, 1999a; Cardinale, 1999b; Gedalius, 1999; Ernst, 1999; Cardinale, 2000; Zernike, 2001). Implied here is the people in this decaying community are not victimized by poverty, joblessness, and structural racism and classism, but rather are the cause of their own dispossessed conditions.

“Cyber School” prides itself on its “state of the art” technology. It is common for schools to sign partnerships with corporations as a means by which to acquire technology, sports equipment, etc. (Boyles, 1998; Giroux, 1999; Kohn & Shannon, 1999; Robertson, 1999; Saltman, 2004). Based upon three years of data collection, we have come to understand “technology” in this particular school to look an awful lot like “surveillance.” For example, there are three metal detectors at the school entrance, and video cameras and armed, uniformed guards throughout the school. In fact, Power City Police operate a substation from inside the administrative area. Even laptops used by students are loaded with observation/tracking software. While metal detectors and zero tolerance policies exist in both white middle class suburban schools and urban schools serving youth from culturally oppressed backgrounds, in suburban white communities, metal detectors are arguably installed to protect enrolled students from outside forces, the intruding “Other”. In urban schools, this same equipment is seemingly viewed as a necessary means by which to patrol and control attending youth. Thus, the subjectivity of criminal is created among poor urban youth.

“Cyber School,” an institution built entirely using corporate funds, may be an ultimate example of privatization and education. Quickly emerging from the data is that this corporate partnership, and the uses of technology articulated in the contract, is taking on a particular form among low income urban youth, which leads to serious questions concerning classism and racism and control over the minds and bodies of urban youth. Answers to how and why the construction of “Cyber School” began in Power City, and how there is an absence of open critique along any of these lines, are deeply embedded in the social, economic, and demographic history of the area.

1800-1880

The social, economic, and demographic history of “Power City” is similar, in some ways, to that of other industrial Northern communities. Although details differ, throughout this particular history, those with little social, economic, and political power are continuously manipulated by those few who control the natural resources and labor of others. This trend can be seen through the years on the site that was to become “Power City.” It begins with the Anglo elite’s treatment of First Nations People, and continues with the domination of Southern and Eastern European laborers, and follows with further exploitation in which contemporary residents live, most of whom are poor and white and of African descent, and concludes with the current corporatization of the local high school.

After the 1776 Revolution between the Colonies and Britain, in order to pay off its war debt, the United States government was paid substantially by large Anglo land companies for the right to procure Native land in Northern States from tribal leaders. As the site that was eventually to become Power City was located on the convergence of three large rivers, it became a valuable natural trade hub, resulting in the development of a substantial First Nations community. Elite Anglo surveyors realized the potential of the site, and immediately became involved. Using force, threat, bribery, and intimidation, the Hallow Acreage Company dislodged land from Native leaders. Members of First Nations groups were forced to relocate south of their former home. The takeover became complete when several military generals who headed the land company lured Anglo, German, and Dutch families from New England into the region with possibility of living in a favorable climate and owning land that was both cheap and fertile. These families were given the power to impact the area’s political,

economic, and social system in line with the values of the dominant culture (Wallace, 1969; Abrams, 1976).

For over thirty years, Anglo, German, and Dutch farmers entered the region with the mindset of ‘carving their homes out of the wilderness’ for economic substance.

Overtime, the settlement steadily grew to its prime trade location. As a result, the region’s emerging leaders became determined to transform the backwoods settlement into a bustling commerce center (Baglier, 1993). Textiles became an important local export as many German and Dutch residents were skilled in spinning and weaving, and numerous cottage industries in this trade were in existence. By 1850, several large textile mills began to characterize the community. These original mills and many newer factories, powered by hydroelectric plants, would eventually produce textiles for global consumption, and thus give rise to “Power City” (Wilner, 1931; Braider, 1972; Baglier, 1993; Graham, 1994).

1880-1930

Power City took center-stage across the globe while heading into the 20th century as a mass textile producer, but also somewhat unexpectedly, as an electricity producer. As mentioned, several elite Anglo, German, and Dutch businessmen who emerged from the region’s farming community had their sights on transforming the area into a leading industrial empire, influenced by the Industrial Revolution taking hold in the Northern United States and parts of Europe. To this end, in the late 1890s, these local elite industrialists sought to harness the waters of the region’s sprawling rivers to generate electricity. The electricity transformed the area’s already existing burgeoning textile industry into a potential global giant. Corporate leaders had the cheap energy needed to increase the production of textiles for world consumption (Mitzer, 1981; McGreevy, 1994; Irwin, 1996).

By the turn of the century, the plan to make Power City the greatest textile manufacturing center in the world had been implemented (Irwin, 1996). This required financial backing from many who headed large-scale corporations; it also required that these companies secure cheap labor to construct several powerhouses needed to generate waterpower. Eagerly, many immigrants came from Southern and Eastern Europe to work on these projects, due to oppressive economic and social conditions

back home. From 1860 to 1900, the city's population increased dramatically from 11,500 to 21,000 residents, with Italians and Poles making up nearly forty percent of the total (Douglas, 1981). Unlike many Anglo, German and Dutch residents, who as already more established, were secured in business and commercial enterprise, Southern and Eastern European immigrants were left to endure harsh working conditions in ensuring the hydroelectric power needed to support the numerous textile factories. For over three years, industrial leaders prodded immigrants to dig shafts and portals, engage in tunnel-blasting, and lend various construction skills for 12-15 hours a day. This work provided the foundation for a hydroelectric tunnel. Skilled workers then laid thousands upon thousands of bricks to ensure the tunnel was equipped with the velocity needed to produce hydroelectric power (Adams, 1927; Power City School District, 1993; Irwin, 1996; Feder, 1999).

Interestingly, unlike most Northern industrial communities, after Restoration, those of African descent did not migrate from the South to Power City, as neighboring urban areas offered a more developed job base, particularly in the production and transport of steel. As will be seen, it is not until post-WWII that those of African descent enter the region to fill jobs in the textile mills. First Nations People who continued to live on Reservations, for the most part, also sought work in other easily accessible cities, as the employers in such areas already established a pattern of hiring men of native ancestry. Unlike most Northern cities, the population of the region would never be significantly affected by Hispanic immigration, as less than two percent of the population at any given time considers themselves Latino/a. A very small group of Jewish immigrants did, however, begin to settle in Power City in the early 1900s.

After the tunnels were built, industrial capitalists used their power to exploit further the labor of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, and used the regions' cheap hydroelectric power to produce textiles for global consumption. Industrial capitalists across North America followed the lead of local businesses by setting up shop in Power City. This resulted in nine major textile factories opening their doors, thereby firmly establishing a defined global presence in this industry.

Power City's textile boom radically altered the social fabric of the community. From 1890-1925, this was the fastest growing metropolis in the state. Its population increased from 21,000 to 75,200, with Italian and Poles nearly making up 55% of the

total (Irwin, 1994). The continual influx of citizens drove the dominant society to act swiftly to protect their economic, social, and political hegemony. By 1915, multi-generational residents of Anglo and German descent coalesced in the community East of Power City’s main street. Because these citizens held the most powerful positions in the area, compared to life in immigrant neighborhoods, they utilized governmental resources to provide better paved streets, mail delivery, garbage collection, and street lighting. They also used their power to procure decently funded schools for their children (Douglas, 1981; Mitzer, 1981; Feder, 1999).

Without the political, economic, and social power to procure resources for developing functional communities, Southern and Eastern European residents, on the West side of Power City’s main street, became the underclass in the community. The lack of government resources allocated to developing ethnic neighborhoods conflated with economic powerlessness to confine these citizens to inferior services and schools. The Southern and Eastern European immigrants, who were involved in increasing union activity, were often framed by city industrialists as “radical” socialists, and therefore, a threat to the capitalist system.

Like elsewhere, the city’s political and economic leaders used informal and formal educational structures to socialize immigrants into the “virtues” of democracy. For example, Power City Elementary School, which was constructed in 1901, like most public institutions of public learning, was involved in teaching immigrants about “American values” and good citizenship. These citizens also learned, indirectly, they were considered less than human by the dominant society. Unlike many Anglo, German and Dutch children, Southern and Eastern European children attended schools that were cramped, dirty, and overcrowded. Teachers from the dominant society also did not respect the students’ cultural background; instruction was based on rote memorization, and corporal punishment was common (Tyack, 1990; Rice, 1992; Anyon, 1997; Diner, 1998; Urban & Wagoner, 1999; Spring, 2000). Many Southern and Eastern European immigrants who could so afford, rejected the local public school as it was seen as based on Protestant values. Instead, they enrolled their children in parochial schools in an effort to retain their own religious traditions (Feder, 1999).

To ensure the community would be firmly committed to a common set of values, social activists and political leaders decided to rely upon both formal and informal education as a means to “civilize” foreign children. For example, a YMCA was set up by a group of Anglo and German industrialists in the center of Power City. It became a place where Southern and Eastern European immigrants were taught hygiene, formal English, civics, and practical skills, such as bookkeeping and cooking (Feder, 1999). Similarly, evening classes were held in Power City municipal buildings to educate immigrant women in English. In some factories and mills, night schools were opened in which English and civic lessons were taught. Again, many elite businessmen felt this form of education would help diffuse anger generated against the industrial system by local unions, as more and more union officials called on textile owners to provide employees with better working conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages.

Before, during, and after WWI, popular media outlets, controlled by members of the dominant culture, created a particular sense of hysteria. Major magazines, newspapers, and popular films erroneously framed Southern and Eastern Europeans as political ‘radicals,’ who were tied to Bolshevism in Europe (Barson & Heller, 2001). Such propaganda fuelled many residents of the dominant culture to view these residents as a threat to the privileged positions they enjoyed (Brinkley, 1999). To stamp out the ‘Red presence,’ area business and political leaders called on school officials to require teachers to take loyalty oaths, to review and censure textbooks and materials containing “anti-American” statements, and to necessitate that workers take Americanization classes at night in area mills (Jaffe, 1972).

With the continual influx of ethnic immigrants into the region, Power City’s political and economic leaders sensed the formal and informal educational structures were inadequate to assert their control over the region’s political, economic, and cultural spheres. Just as in many other Northern urban centers during the early 1920s, Power City’s population of Southern and Eastern immigrants eventually exceeded the population of West Side multi-generational Anglos and Germans. Many residents of the business class feared immigrants now had the power to penetrate their *de facto* segregated community and schools. Long standing working class citizens of any

culture also feared incoming Southern and Eastern European citizens would provide unnecessary competition for wages at the local mills.

Like other Northern cities, institutional racism structured social relations in Power City’s social, economic, and political contexts. During the early 1920s, local industrial and political leaders believed the Ku Klux Klan’s virulent brand of racism could help to maintain control over textile workers. At the behest of industrial and political leaders, the Klan descended upon the area in 1922. The Invisible Empire cloaked itself in rhetoric that denounced the Southern and Eastern Catholic immigrants for promoting ‘vice and crime.’ They claimed that these immigrants sought not only to control Power City, but also sought to control the world (Jackson, 1967; Chalmers, 1987; Knobel & Knobel, 1996; Perea, 1997).

The Klan initially used fear and intimidation tactics against ethnic residents. Klan members bombed a local YMCA and a local place of worship in 1923, causing emotional and economic hardship to immigrant residents. In 1925, the Klan’s tactics became even more focused, as over 10,000 Klan members attended a convention, where they demanded city officials to stop hiring Catholic or Jewish public school teachers (Feder, 1999). Fortunately, the activity came to an abrupt halt in 1927, when several Klan officials attempted to win approval by securing positions in public office. Most voters did not support the Klan’s Americanization program. They felt acclimation should take place more surreptitiously, through the various informal and formal educational structures set up by the city’s elite before the War.

1930-1960

The Depression served notice that the dream of making Power City a mega metropolis would run into significant problems. Power City, unlike other urban areas within the state, did not have the diversification in its manufacturing base to prosper during these difficult years. Many City residents, especially foreign-born residents, endured economic, social and emotional hardships from 1930-1940, as a local economy based upon the textile industry showed its vulnerability to periodic economic free-falls (Tindall & Shi, 2000). This caused the city’s population to remain static during the decade, and played a significant role in stemming the tide of Southern and Eastern

European immigration to the area over the next 70 years (Power City Board of Education, 1993).

During WWII, the city experienced an economic resurgence and changes in the labor force that were reflected nationwide. The federal government and area businesses tapped the textile mills to create materials for use in the war in Europe and Japan. Working-class women from around the region now began work in factories. They produced combat gear, tarps and tents for the Allied cause (Stevenson, 1994). The economic benefits reaped by the war effort came at the expense of many Italian-born and German-born residents. In February 1942, the government declared all Italians and Germans across America “enemy aliens.” For these residents, this amounted to being considered a foreign menace, a sight that needed to be contained and regulated by the government. Washington infringed upon the civil liberties of Power City’s Italian-born and German-born residents, finding it necessary to confiscate their property, regulating their whereabouts through travel restrictions and curfews, and raiding homes of residents considered loyal to Fascism (Goodyear, 2000).

During the post-War period, Power City’s population once again increased as the United States emerged as a military and economic world power (Tindall & Shi, 2000). Many big business leaders bought goods and services at an unprecedented level. Over 12 million returning veterans helped to produce a post-war ‘baby boom,’ which fuelled an insatiable consuming culture. To meet and keep pace with the economic boom, local business leaders called upon a new staple of workers, namely African Americans from the South who sought economic opportunity and social equality in Power City, to join ranks in the manufacturing sector. From 1940-50, the rate of increase in African American population growth was 266%. This group of citizens now accounted for nearly five percent of the population (Douglas, 1981).

The influx of African Americans along with the local ‘baby boom’ among long-time residents altered life within city schools. The population growth compromised city schools, as they began to lack qualified teachers and were overcrowded (Power City School District, 1993). Most students and their families were not overly concerned about the situation, because, at this time, successful performance in urban schools was not an integral part of landing blue-collar jobs that were readily available in the region (Francis, 1986; Glynn, 1986; Kirst, 1986a).

1960-Present

The post-War boom that brought prosperity to the city and especially to its white residents, also paradoxically set the stage for the construction “Cyber School.” The city’s manufacturing base began its steady decline, when the region’s major power station collapsed in the late 1950s. Instead of making needed repairs and updates to the station and textile factories, local businesses began to outsource labor to other parts of the world, where due to increasingly deregulated labor and environmental laws, wages and fixed costs of doing business are less, and therefore, the potential to make a profit is more (Glynn, 1986; Power City School District, 1993; Barry, 1997).

State and federal political leadership also played a key role in Power City’s decline in ways similar to many deindustrializing urban centers. Political leaders in Washington and at the state-level promulgated legislation following World War II designed to create a suburban housing industry which would increase the local tax base.

Unfortunately, the legislation put into operation was designed to create communities that were mostly beneficial to members of the dominant culture. For instance, the Federal Housing Authority’s policy of ‘redlining’ became normal operating procedures in the banking industry. This policy involved making the lending of money to potential non-white homeowners more difficult in newly built sections of the area, as members of the dominant culture feared that these residents would lower property values. The GI Bill also afforded families low interest VA loans to relocate in white, suburban communities, thus energizing white flight. With the creation of the federal highway system under Eisenhower, white suburban residents could now commute to their jobs in Power City and have limited contact with the increasing urban underclass--poor whites and those from culturally dominated groups (Jackson, 1985; Kirst, 1986b; Power City School District, 1993; Kenny, 2000).

In the mid-1960s, Power City along with other debilitated urban centers in the North were given resources from Washington to launch urban renewal projects that were not only designed to lure suburban residents back into the city, but also to attract new business sources that could provide employment opportunities. Businesses from across the country turned down financial incentives from local leaders to set up operations in the area, finding it more economically feasible to outsource labor to other parts of the globe than to locate to Power City. The city also lost a substantial

portion of its tax base when city and state officials cleared 'slum sites,' including the property of some local merchants and working poor citizens, to make the landscape more palatable to suburbanites (Staba, 2002). One 1966 federally funded urban renewal project that included the building of a shopping mall, convention center, and amusement part did little to boost the city's economy. The attractions only generated sporadic economic activity as members of the dominant culture would make occasional journeys to the city.

Like in other cities, white flight to the suburbs drained the city's tax base, which adversely affected the area's schools. By 1967, local newspapers made it quite apparent that race was a key factor in the allocation of school resources as well as in the structuring of schools across the district. Not only were schools segregated by race within the district, but buildings attended by African American students were dirty, overcrowded, and lacking resources and qualified teachers compared to schools attended by white students (Spieler, 1967). Because African American residents did not collectively have political or economic power within the region, the mobilized voices among those of African descent which argued for desegregation and equitable funding of schooling was largely ignored by the power structure.

The crumbling of Power City and its school system only rapidly continued during the 1970s-1990s. Cheaper labor sources and increasingly less stringent environmental laws in other parts of the world all factored into the loss of the local, and indeed, Western, textile industry. According to one school official, the city lost 30,000 of the 40,000 manufacturing jobs in the 1970s alone. By spring of 2000, textile factories only employed 5,000 workers (Staba, 2002). For the past 20 years, the economic drought has pushed many working and middle class African American families to relocate in the Sunbelt, searching to find good paying jobs. It has also caused an exodus of whites from the region (Power City School District, 1993). On the other hand, many African American citizens and working poor citizens from the dominant culture often lack the financial resources, education, and cultural capitals to secure jobs outside of the North's decaying urban centers.

As a result of the post-industrial economy, Power City's population has declined substantially. The 55,000 citizens who occupied the region in the year 2000 is a far cry from the 102,394 residents who resided in the city during its textile height in

1960. Today, African American citizens make up nearly 25% of the population, and most are working poor or impoverished. Impoverished and working poor citizens of the dominant culture make up 75% of the residents who live within urban deterioration and crime. The average per capita income is only \$10,500, and almost 70% of students who attend “Cyber School” are on public assistance (Zernike, 2001). Working poor and elderly urban residents of all cultural orientations also experience a drastic cut in social services, thus further adding to their marginalization (Giroux, 1998).

With Power City’s unemployment rate currently at twice the national average, the job growth rate lagging behind most regions in the state, and the poverty rate steadily increasing, many have looked for a means by which to solve the area’s social, educational, and economic ills. To date, this has seemingly been found in the city’s super school. Some area residents have uncritically accepted the rhetoric that the school will lift the area out of poverty. In this thinking, corporate representatives and local politicians contend the school will eliminate crime by disciplining youth through an array of sophisticated surveillance equipment and an ever-present police force, correct the digital divide between the suburban ‘haves’ and urban ‘have-nots,’ and thus prepare inner-city youth to meet the assumed mounting educational demands associated with the new economy.

Based upon the social, economic, and demographic history of Power City, other dispossessed communities across North America should be very skeptical about the private sector involving itself in public schooling. For the past one hundred and fifty years, Power City businesses leaders promised large-scale production of textiles would bring ongoing prosperity to the region. Throughout the years, most area residents found the opposite to be true; struggling without a job and living in poverty became a reality for many. Today, the future looks bleak for the residents who remain in the area. They are left to languish in poverty, without the prospect of the textile industry providing work, and without a powerful social net to cushion life in a post-industrial urban region.

Conclusion

Sadly, because numerous Northern cities have been allowed to slip into post-industrial decay, more communities may allow their desperation and hopelessness direct them towards the belief that large-scale corporations armed with surveillance equipment and laptop computers can bring the urban sector back to life. Rather than continuing to put faith in the private sector, which has clearly failed urban centers in the past and present, hopefully, our historical analysis of a community that agreed to the building of “Cyber School” can contribute to a louder and more critical voice about the private inroads into schooling.

By putting Power City’s past under a critical lens, we have also sharpened our understanding as to how political and economic forces braid together to structure urban schooling and urban life in contemporary society. The cycles of poverty, racism, and cultural conflict brought about, in large, by the greed of Power City’s corporate leaders, leads us to believe neo-liberal market imperatives will not resuscitate America’s cities and schools. However, like most Americans, we believe residents in Power City have internalized the belief that the market is a solution to all problems (Giroux, 2003; Hursh & Martina, 2003). For the past thirty years, America’s political and economic leaders have ensured that the public would support a dismantling of America’s social services, in the form of public schools, parks, and prisons, by positioning “big government” as a financial drain and a stagnate breeding ground for moral decay. In this sense, public institutions are increasingly shifting to the domain of the private, where there is thought to be a track record for results, efficiency, and profit. When the blurring of the public and private sector occurs in education, in the form of vouchers, partnerships, charter schools, and in institutions such as “Cyber School,” the potential to teach students about equality and to think critically becomes sublimated to corporate values. To this end, the goal of schooling arguably shifts from encouraging fully engaged, critical citizens, to producing compliant workers (Giroux, 2000; Saltman, 2001; Giroux & Seals, 2003).

Politicians get voted in when they promise they will no longer allow money to be “thrown” at education. This supposed past action has resulted, as argued in *A Nation at Risk*, in the loss of the United States technological and economic edge, the lack of skilled workers, and the decline of industry. In truth, the federal government of the

United States has very little to do with funding education. With nearly 75 percent of the money used to finance local schools collected from the regressive local property tax, it becomes clear why schools in upper class communities look distinctly different, and better, compared to those in low income neighborhoods (Kozol, 1991; Anyon, 1997). If the government wanted to rebuild every underfunded, overcrowded school in the nation, it easily could. With \$300 billion defense contracts awarded to Lockheed Martin and \$30 billion bailouts to Boeing Corporation, it is clear the priorities are clearly military and corporate.

The African American and poor and working class white “Cyber School” students who attended their formally dilapidated and overcrowded school, are currently portrayed as extremely fortunate to be enrolled in this new, cutting edge facility. In this logic, the free market provides for those worthy and hardworking. However, what is left out of the neoliberal characterization of market involvement in schooling is that that these corporate entities have partaken in the gutting of public money to be spent on education, particularly in low-income communities of color. Also ignored is the fact that with the regressive ways of financing public schooling, white suburban middle and upper middle class districts often have acceptable revenue to run their schools. In such communities, privatization is mostly sold not as a route to social mobility, but on the basis of adding more. It can clearly be argued, therefore, that the profit made by “school choice,” and the control over the form and content of critical knowledge, preys on those children most dispossessed in terms of social class and race. These are the very students, who enmeshed in a web of poverty and institutional classism and racism, desperately need to learn to think critically as citizens.

As argued by several transformative scholars, the assault on public schooling parallels the shift in other spheres, from social investment to social policing, which has serious implications regarding social class and race (Anyon, 1997; Casella, 2001; Saltman 2001; Casella, 2003; Giroux, 2003). This shift, upon reflection, evokes a highly controlled police state, characterized by the rampant building of prisons, the strong support of the death penalty in many states, and the reframing of welfare to workfare. With the current “war on terrorism,” the establishment of homeland security, increased border patrols, secrete military tribunals, and epidemic and legalized racial profiling, the police state has been elevated to new levels. In fact, according to the

ACLU, the new “USA Patriot Act,” signed by George Bush allows law enforcement agencies comprehensive surveillance powers which apply to sweeping definitions of terrorism, criminal and intelligence investigations, and to cases where individuals are engaging in political dissent. This shift to a militarized state is presently reflected in schools, for example, in the installation of surveillance equipment, the institution of zero tolerance policies, and testing and standardizing of curriculum. It is also reflected in the passage of the No Child Left Behind law, which has given military officials free access to impoverished urban high schools for recruitment purposes (Belowitz & Long, 2003).

Most of the examples just listed in describing the shift from social investment to a corporate-military state involve control of economically dispossessed people, especially those from culturally dominated groups. “Cyber School,” a total corporate institution wired with 62 video cameras and numerous metal detectors may be an ultimate space in which young bodies and minds which fit this social class and race profile are constructed as “criminal.”

As discussed, “Cyber School” is noted for having instituted one of the area’s most stringent zero-tolerance policies. The city’s police force also operates a substation at the school, staffed by three armed police officers and several security guards. At least one police officer is always monitoring a bank of 12 television screens, which, fed by the surveillance cameras, provides constant observation of the school’s halls and other areas. With the growing blight within Power City, we believe more and more administrators and local residents are buying into the idea that all disaffected inner city youth are potential criminals. This policy reflects North America’s growing hostility and indifference towards urban youth (Devine, 1996; Giroux, 1998; Casella, 2001; Giroux, 2003).

In essence, Power City has erroneously placed blame on its youth for the problems caused by a post-industrial economy. In this sense, the public school takes shape in the nexus of the prison, military, and corporation. With this analysis of historical, social, and economic trends, it is clear how and why the city in this study became so permeable to corporate influence. Those with little hope are conditioned uncritically to believe in private benevolence.

Notes

1 “Power City,” “Cyber School,” and “Power City High School” are pseudonyms. The names of the school and the city have been changed to protect the privacy of our informants.

2 To protect the privacy of our informants, we have not included information involving the corporations that built, and continue to finance, “Cyber School.”

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