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# Intellectualism, Infiltration, and the Imaginary: The Challenge of Conservative Think Tanks in Developing Coherent Democratic Community

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*THIRD PAPER*

IMMIGRATION, INFILTRATION, AND THE IMAGINARY:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT AND BORDER CROSSING IN DEVELOPING  
EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY

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...it is impossible to account fully for the success of all the holistic philosophies inspired by a common indifference to differences, without taking into account the specifically intellectual functions of their silences and reticences, denials, and slips or, conversely, the displacements and transfers they make towards the themes of 'homogenization,' 'massification,' or 'globalization.' Thus obedience of the dominant ideology manages to impose itself on intellectuals in the form of obedience to the conventions and proprieties of the intellectual world.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 192-193

This paper extends the question "What should we be doing and what kinds of activities would we be engaged in during the time we take off to craft and assert ourselves as public intellectuals?" Kathleen Kesson and Jim Henderson provided us with historical background (and a delightful song parody) while Kent den Heyer challenges us to take two years off from the academy and engage in research that would better enable us to communicate with and influence those in positions of power. For the purpose of this paper, we wish to join with Kesson, Henderson, and den Heyer, if only momentarily, in crafting new ways to comprehend public intellectualism. To wit, what forms of immigration and infiltration can we imagine and craft to better position ourselves as part of the larger conversations concerning schools and society? We use the term "immigration" specifically to highlight the changing demographics and potentially changing nature of U.S. society in 2005. By sheer numbers, change occurs. In the most unlikely of places in rural Georgia, for example, "se habla Español" regularly appears on store fronts. Beyond sheer numbers, however, infiltration also means doing the grunt work of making our way into otherwise exclusive or elusive conversations where important decisions are made concerning schools and society. To immigrate and infiltrate effectively, however, will require imagination.

Imagining is forming a mental image of something not actually present in the senses--it means to believe and suppose. We will need our imaginations to overcome status quo assumptions, nay expectations, of what it means to be a public intellectual. Indeed, if the general public were asked to make a list of living people they considered to be public intellectuals, our guess is that this list would be of George Will-like conservatives and will far outstretch any list of "critical" or "leftist" thinkers. Why this is so can be left to speculation for now. The point is that action should be taken to challenge "acceptance communities" (i.e., communities awash in the status quo who rarely demonstrate Freire's [1974] notion of critical transitivity) and transform them into epistemic communities of proportional knowers who oppose the status quo. It is in the epistemic community that critical questions are raised to challenge what Maxine Greene (1990) calls the "givens" of society.

As the previous papers indicate, part of the larger practical, grass-roots project is to make connections with, for example, divisions within the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Divisions A (Administration), K (Teaching and Teacher Education), and L (Educational Policy and Politics) are spaces where we might consider inserting our voices and engaging in dialogue. We might infiltrate these divisions, not in terms of conquering warfare, but in order to have a seat at the table and engage in conversation. As den Heyer sees it, we can also take two years off from the rat race of entering cloistered publication cliques and engage in a more broadened sense of community, e.g., "work in schools, with commissions, bureaucracies affecting education, public debates, articles in popular presses, art performances and installations, and numbers of books and articles read." (den Heyer, 2005, p. 8).

We join in Kesson, Henderson, and den Heyer's imaginary and argue that we should develop imaginations of possibilities *outside* of the sanctioned organizations that establish the boundaries we are urging all of us to cross. Beyond functional representations of difference, how can we devote our time and our ideas to things outside the standard school-linked foci of school councils and PTAs? Might we

consider “out” work in the American Civil Liberties Union, the Sierra Club, or the Green Party? One answer is obviously “yes,” and this avenue might allow us to continue the thrust of the previous papers in setting curriculum scholars in positions of real power. In the song parody in Kesson and Henderson’s paper, however, we found a stanza at once moving and debilitating. In the parody of “These Schools Are Your Schools,” the ending chorus goes like this: “These schools are your schools....No right wing think tanks can ever stop us, In education no one can top us; This is our mission to shape the future; These schools are made for you and me.” (Kesson and Henderson, 2005, pp. 13-14) The passage struck us because of 1) some work on conservative foundations we already have done; 2) the degree of optimism expressed in the ending; and 3) our perception of a disconnect between the reality of think tanks and optimism in spite of them.

All of this is to say that we fear our paper will diverge from the other papers and become the “wet blanket” of the trio. That is, in reading the other papers, it became clearer to us that while we wish to emulate the meliorism within those papers, we are caught in a quagmire of sorts. The degree to which conservative think tanks (e.g., Brookings, Cato, Hoover, Fordham, etc.) are already widely influential is one of the important, if often not understood, hurdles we will have to confront and surmount if we are to “do more to create a ‘public’ that is receptive to our advise about education.” (Kesson and Henderson, p. 10) The expanding degree to which neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideologies are effectively engrained in the general psyche is so daunting that we think we have to be aware of just what those forces are as part of any process of contestation and imagination. Particularly in the virtual absence of liberal think tanks, academics consistently fail to confront, contest, and offer new and different ideas for public consumption (Kovacs and Boyles, 2005). Said differently, while we wish to champion an opening of possibilities such that public intellectualism is seen as what Judith Green (1999) calls deep democratic activism, we offer tempered skepticism in the form of an exploration of think tanks that we hope will both challenge us to be self-critical and imaginary at the same time.

### Conservatives and their Think-Tanks

“Over 30 years after the cowardly murder of Martin Luther king, Jr., black America sits on the brink of collective disaster.” (West, 2005) “Income inequality is growing to levels not seen since the Gilded Age around the 1880’s.” (*The Economist*, 2004) “As a result of more restrictions on entering the U.S. due to post-9/11 security concerns, fewer foreigners are visiting the U.S.” (Siskind, 2003) The Right controls all three branches of government, and vacancies on the Supreme Court threaten *Roe v. Wade*. (Garrett, 2004) “We have a higher percentage of our population in prison than any other nation. And, we keep building more prisons; in fact, many locales lobby for new prisons as a tool for economic recovery.” (Moyers, 2004) Unregulated industries, in addition to ripping off millions of people on the West coast in the largest energy scandal ever, continue to pollute the air and water. (Bustillo, 2004) While corporate executives throw multi-million dollar birthday parties, taking millions from shareholders, the politicians they support tell us that we cannot afford universal health care. (Clark, 2004) Tort “reform,” one of the pinnacles of George W. Bush’s successful reelection campaign, is now being contested in Congress, while at the same time the president works to make tax cuts to the wealthiest permanent. (Zion, 2004) Children are not only being forced to absorb free market economics, they are experiencing a free market revolution, as neoconservatives work diligently to end public schools as we know them, believing that market-based reform will save our “failing” education system.

While a complete analysis of the effects of rightist-leaning think tanks is beyond the scope of this paper, we include the above passage as evidence of what, on a broad scale, the “idea brokers” have been working towards. While education is only one area where neoconservative think tanks seek to influence public policy, it has become *the* issue of many neoconservatives. So what are think tanks and what they are doing to reshape public schools in ways more suitable to neoconservative and corporate ends?

Quite simply, think tanks are nonprofit organizations that both produce and rely on research and expertise to aggressively influence the public, political leaders, and policy. (Abelson, 2002; Rich, 2004) While most claim to be non-partisan, part of the requirement to remain tax-exempt, the institutes support legislation that furthers a neoconservative agenda. It should be noted here that Left-leaning think tanks do exist, but they are outnumbered 2 to 1, outspent 3 to 1 and have failed to counter the advocacy or activity of the Right. (Rich, 2004) “Conservatives,” explain Stefancic and Delgado (1996) “tend to have more money than liberals. They raise it more effectively and spend it more wisely than their counterparts on the left.” (p. 142) As a result, the discourse over public education in America has a distinctly neoconservative tone and stands in opposition to kind of democratic emancipation referred to by Kesson and Henderson (2005).

Things were not always this way. Before the 1960s there was a healthier balance of institutes representing a host of viewpoints; the first think tanks were, in fact, progressive. Andrew Rich traces the beginning of the conservative think tank explosion to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential defeat, after which the business community committee itself to influencing national policy. (p. 31) “For scholars of modern conservatism,” writes Rich, “the emergence of conservative think tanks, in particular, is attributable to the efforts of conservative intellectuals along with corporate and ideological patrons, who formed think tanks and other organizations in order to disrupt the political status quo.” (p. 32)

Disrupting the status quo was contingent upon increasing the number of corporate representatives in Washington. As a result, the number of trade associations with offices in the District of Columbia went from 99 at the beginning of 1960 to 229 by the end of the decade. (Rich, p.49) An increased number of “agents” in the capitol guaranteed corporate access to policy makers. While access is one matter, influence is entirely another. In order to shape policy in manners favorable to their needs, corporations sponsored research, rewarding individuals whose work furthered their various causes. (p. 149)

Central to corporate needs in deregulation, that is, less interference by the government in business affairs. In the mid 1970s, William Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury in both the Nixon and Ford administrations and head of the ultra-conservative John M. Olin Foundation, called on business leaders to support and finance a “counter intelligentsia” which would check the activities of “leftist” universities, considered by many on the right to be dens of socialism. (Spring, pp. 37-38) A number of wealthy foundations, corporations, and individuals responded, and conservative activists continue to echo Simon’s words, blaming left leaning teachers’ colleges, among others, for public education’s “failure.” (D’Souza, 1991)

Since Simon’s clarion call, the Right has only grown stronger. Today the actions of neoconservative think tanks continue to further a corporatist agenda, inhibiting participatory and deliberative democracy by dominating the discourse that influences agenda setting. Because neoconservative think tanks are so well funded, they have freedom, access, and influence that the average American citizen—or academic for that matter—simply does not have. Indeed, they have freedom, access, and influence that the so-called “liberal intelligentsia” can only dream of. The Heritage Foundation, for example, spent over 34 million dollars to influence policy in 2003 alone. (Heritage Foundation, 2004) Of that figure, more than 14 million went to research, 6 million went to media and government relations, and an additional 7 million went to educational programs. One can’t help wondering what liberal minded scholars might actually be able to accomplish given such budgets, which include over 2 million dollars a year for conferences and an additional 2 million for “fringe benefits.”

With mammoth budgets to support them, scholars at think tanks have freedoms and opportunities that university scholars simply do not have. Andrew Carnegie and Robert Brookings, founders of two of the oldest American think tanks, “believed that by establishing an environment where academics would not be distracted by teaching responsibilities but could focus entirely on research relevant to public policy,

think tanks could play an important and much needed role in policy making.” (Abelson, p. 10)

Today’s think tanks are no different, and, in addition to being “freed” from teaching, think tank scholars do not have to advise students, grade papers, fight for department funds, compete for grants, or seek promotion and tenure. Here’s where den Heyer’s imaginative challenge can be seen.

Ample free time allows for not only research but advocacy, another activity that distinguishes “scholars” at think tanks from scholars at most universities. J. P. Greene, for example, who, along with two assistants, runs the Manhattan Institute’s Education Resource Center, produced 13 “studies” in two years. And last year alone, according to a recent article in *Education Week*, Greene’s team “published 43 newspaper opinion pieces and was cited on radio, on television, or in print more than 500 times.” (Cavanagh, 2004) Additionally, according to his biography, Greene’s work was cited four times in the Supreme Court’s *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* school voucher decision, the decision that declared vouchers constitutional. (Manhattan Institute, 2004) Greene’s aggressive marketing confirms Rich’s finding, that “think tanks most successful at conveying their ideas, at least through national newspapers, are conservative, marketing-oriented think tanks.” (Rich, p. 102) “I make no bones about marketing,” declared William Baroody of the American Enterprise Institute, “We pay as much attention to the dissemination of product as to the content.” (Spivak, 2004)

Additionally, conservative-owned publications like *The Weekly Standard*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* routinely publish and cite the works of conservative think tanks, ensuring that their message reaches, and influences, nationwide audiences. Alfie Kohn notes that “the demand for accountability didn’t start in living rooms; it started in places like the Heritage Foundation.” (Kohn, 2004, p. 20) Thanks to its enormous budget and ties to media moguls, including Rupert Murdoch, the Heritage Foundation can make sure that every living room hears what its advocates have to say, repeatedly. (Schaefer, 2005) “After a time,” notes Kohn, “even parents who think their own children’s school is just fine may swallow the generalizations they’ve been fed about the inadequacy of public education in

general.” (Kohn, p. 20) In addition to publishing in the mainstream media, scholars at conservative think tanks produce their own journals and routinely write for one another. For example, Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and fellow at the Hoover Institution, will write pieces for the American Enterprise Institute and members of the American Enterprise Institute will return the favor, or they might simply write articles together. Their focus on marketing and their dedication to spreading neoconservative ideology distinguishes think tank “scholars” from many, though not all, scholars working at universities.

### Considerations and Implications

Now the point of all of this is to say that we face a daunting task if we are serious about establishing epistemic communities that counter neo-conservative and neo-liberal thought and action. While we are tempted, we feel compelled to resist taking the two years den Heyer urges us to take off from the rat race of publishing. Our resistance is not because we have any deep faith in the populist value of our intellectual work. We agree with den Heyer that all too often we play the promotion and tenure game. But we are concerned that we would replace one sort of tail-chasing with another if what we did on our hiatus was to read “reports of books, articles, art, and bureaucratic initiatives already published” even if the ultimate goal was to engage in “philosopher cafes, writing to newspapers, producing leaflets, addressing PTA meetings, teacher union meetings, and working more closely with teachers, students, principals, and superintendents.” (den Heyer, pp. 4-5) Perhaps our fear is that these groups are already so influenced by neoconservative and neoliberal ideology (via think tanks *and* other sources) that letters to the editor would simply fall short.

At the same time, we hesitate to offer as a solution a “fight fire with fire” retort. That is, while we think having the millions of dollars conservative think tanks have would enable the spread of an alternative ideology, we want to resist any hegemony that might come with the format. We want to

be mindful of content over marketing, in other words, not the other way around. That said, what imaginary can be offered? Kesson, Henderson, and den Heyer's ideas are at least novel and inventive. They provide us with opportunities and optimism.

We want to suggest, in addition to the other papers' suggestions, therefore, that action should be taken, but our action must be focused, coordinated, long-term, and accessible. Two recent reports, the National Committee for a Responsive Philanthropy's *Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy* and the Commonweal Institute's *Responding to the Attack on Public Education and Teacher Unions*, are particularly instructive towards these ends, offering public intellectuals, and the universities housing them, analyses of the strategies and successes of the Far Right, as well as a number of ideas for countering their efforts and activities. These reports attribute conservative success to specific strategies which include: securing flexible, long-term funding; building networks and infrastructure; involvement in all levels of policy creation, dissemination, and implementation at local, state, and federal levels; and alignment of activities.

Undoubtedly, conservative success rests partially on the amount of money behind their think tanks and foundations. Their ability to put large sums of money behind research for years at a time keeps the academic Left on the defensive, responding to conservative ideas rather than imagining new possibilities for U.S. public schools. Scholars invested in the latter will have to find grant money to fund their initiatives, calling on progressive leaders from communities, businesses, and the culture industry for long-term help. The progressive website Moveon.org's ability to generate millions of dollars annually for advocacy activities is also instructive towards our ends. A compelling website defending public education could be used for raising money and coordinating efforts to counter the activities of conservatives at local, state, and federal levels. While scholars may long for the days when tax-generated dollars funded research, those days, for most of us, are gone. While we recognize the benefits of tax supported research, public intellectuals cannot sit contemplatively by

waiting for the tax codes to change while conservatives raise millions of dollars reshaping America's educational landscape. Part of their efforts, incidentally, involves keeping tax codes favorable to corporations, which undermines support for schools from kindergarten through college.

Network building and the creation of an infrastructure for disseminating research, framing arguments, accessing the media, influencing politicians, tracking activities of the far Right, and training new intellectuals/scholars are also essential steps towards seriously challenging foundation supported ideology and propaganda. (Commonweal Institute, pp. 44-45) While academic conferences offer venues for like-minded scholars to gather and critique, they do little towards influencing the ideas and behavior of the various publics we purportedly serve. A two-year hiatus from conferencing might be more productive than a two-year hiatus from publishing, provided we use the interim to build coalitions and networks across disciplinary and geographical lines. A vast network of scholars and activists, monitoring and challenging the activities of conservative foundations will do far more for the defense of public education than keeping our work to ourselves. While we focus on publications for the academic press, J.P. Greene uses a conservative network to make sure his work finds its way into hundreds of newspapers, onto the desks of prominent politicians, and even into the hands of members of the Supreme Court. (Kovacs and Boyles, 2005)

With a network and infrastructure in place, public intellectuals can coordinate activities and focus energy on specific locals across the country. When Checker Finn's Thomas B. Fordham Foundation was busy using questionable research to convince the city of Dayton, Ohio to turn public schools into Fordham-run charter schools, public intellectuals should have been before local and state boards of education challenging every piece of research presented by Fordham scholars. When Diane Ravitch flew from New York to Georgia in order to reframe the state's history standards, public intellectuals should have offered intelligent and vocal opposition to her inclusion and

activities. When Krista Kafer sits before various house committees claiming U.S. students are falling further and further behind international peers, public intellectuals should be present to directly challenge her assertions. All of these activities require a nationwide effort to monitor and challenge conservative efforts, and while the task may seem daunting, existing colleges of education could easily become network hubs. Two dozen graduate students spread across the country would be enough to monitor various media channels for events, publications, and legislative activities which have been dominated by the far Right. After identifying issues and areas being focused on by the Right, these same graduate students could coordinate counter arguments and activities, drawing on research from scholars across the country.

These are not short-term solutions; the far Right spent three decades building infrastructure and networks to make sure their message finds its way into living rooms and legislative chambers across the country. Fortunately, as evidenced by this conference, public intellectuals have already created the beginnings of such an infrastructure, with different “policy labs” across the country doing a great deal to counter rightist assaults and encroachment into public schools. (Gary Ruskin’s efforts immediately come to mind.) The most pressing question for us at this time, however, is how long will it take scholars to adapt to a different paradigm? We can no longer sit quietly by while the far Right dominates policy creation and implementation at all levels across the country. In order to truly challenge this hegemony, scholars will have to spend more time outside of academe’s halls and traditions, something many scholars are not comfortable doing. Of course, leaving the ivory tower, even if only for brief stints, is at least partly what being a public intellectual means.

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