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First They Came for Everyone: The Assault on Civil Society Is an Injury to All

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To paraphrase a famous caution against complacency among intellectuals: First they came for society's most vulnerable, and we were silent. They eventually came for us, but it was too late to find help, since no allies remained.² In this essay I suggest two overlapping points. First, I argue that a market logic, masked by what could be referred to as "corporate libertarianism," threatens major sectors of civil society, including educational institutions such as our own. As educators, we should understand ourselves to be part of a civil society complex worth defending. Second, communication scholars have a special role to play in linking with other civil society groups, both through various forms of activism and by critiquing corporate libertarianism's paradigmatic underpinnings. Given that we possess a special purchase on the relationship between media and power, communication scholars should engage in policy struggles and intellectual battles that at first glance might not seem germane to our specific work-related problems.

From Neoliberalism to Corporate Libertarianism

During less politicized moments, the contention that we must steel ourselves against such a gathering threat might smack of undue alarmism. But recent developments have cast power arrangements into stark relief, offering lessons for everyone connected to educational work. Higher education's worsening labor conditions are all too familiar: increasing reliance on contingent labor, greater exploitation of graduate students, fewer tenure-track jobs, and so on. In one troubling sign, approximately 65% of all faculty appointments in the United States are now non-tenure-track (Kezar & Sam, 2010).

Although these trends are symptomatic of broader political-economic shifts, too often we view educational labor issues narrowly without making connections or seeing them in their proper sociopolitical context. What befalls public school teachers and public-sector unions seems distant from our daily routines. But we should see these conflicts as data points of a larger pattern: the systematic impoverishment of public services and civil society institutions in tandem with the bolstering of corporate power.

¹ The author would like to thank Christina Dunbar-Hester, Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, Joseph McCombs, Beza Merid, and Jonathan Sterne for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

² The original statement, which referred to Nazi Germany, reportedly first appeared in print in Mayer (1955).

An extension of neoliberal logic (Harvey, 2005; Pickard, 2007), “corporate libertarianism” connotes an apotheosis of market fundamentalism that combines the exaltation of absolute individual liberty with the delegitimation of much that is social, public, or common good-related.³ Further, this framework emphasizes that corporations are specific manifestations of neoliberal logic, increasingly empowered and emboldened to act as political agents that seek to undermine even weak redistributive mechanisms in U.S. society.

Recent efforts to cut teachers’ salaries, benefits, and labor freedoms in Madison, Wisconsin, and similar dramas replaying across the country evidence this power shift. In many states, battle lines have been drawn between those who work for and benefit from social services and those who, though often benefiting from such services, scapegoat public-sector funding as wasteful while largely ignoring widening inequities. In the latter view, allocating tax revenues to support social services is illegitimate, even if corporations and the wealthy are being taxed at historically low rates. Taking for granted that contradictions run deep—for example, many people may hate government in theory but still love their subsidized mortgages and Medicare—these differences are more than mere policy quibbles: they strike at core assumptions about what kind of society we should inhabit.

A starting point for these debates should be the observation that Americans are living in a period of widening inequality that is rare among democracies and nearly unrivaled in modern American history. One percent of the population now commands 40% of the nation’s wealth and nearly one-quarter of its income (Stiglitz, 2011). From a regressive tax system that redistributes wealth upward to rising tuition costs and reduced aid that render college financially beyond reach for the disadvantaged, these trends undercut the potential for democratic culture and impedes class mobility in American society. Historically, it has been public activities within a range of associations and groups maintaining some autonomy from markets and states, often placed under the rubric of “civil society,” that have allowed for alternative logics and social formations to develop. And it is these kinds of spaces that are most in jeopardy at this critical juncture.

With Civil Society at Risk, Educators Must Organize

Many of U.S. civil society’s core structures are currently imperiled. Labor unions, community colleges, public-sector employees such as school teachers—those groups and institutions that might diffuse market fundamentalism—are weakened at the very moment corporations are gaining yet more political power. The renown Keynesian economist John Kenneth Galbraith observed that contesting

³ “Corporate libertarianism” was a term employed by David Korten (1995). While his focus was more on global neoliberal instruments like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund (though he did also discuss it in its American context), I am adapting it to underscore the logic best epitomized by the U.S.-specific Tea Party movement, the *Citizens United* case, and other recent manifestations within the American political landscape that evidence an unprecedented elevation of corporate power, often justified by libertarian notions of individual liberty. Elsewhere I am developing a political economic analysis of the historical shift from “corporate liberalism” (Weinstein, 1968) to “corporate libertarianism” through the lens of media policy.

concentrated power requires civil society institutions to serve as a “countervailing power” (Galbraith, 1952). Higher education is arguably a major pillar within this rebalancing process, even as it is threatened by the gradual erosion of governmental support, pressured by market forces, and, in this weakened state, increasingly colonized by corporate power. As we reach out to make common cause with civil society groups—including journalists, whose own crisis parallels some aspects of our own, with similar negative consequences for society (McChesney & Pickard, 2011)—we should understand our struggle as it aligns with others’

A widely circulated article in *The Nation* struck on a number of these themes, arguing that the drive for ever greater “efficiency” encourages a devolution toward a “reserve army of contingent labor” that is “cheaper to hire and easier to fire” (Deresiewicz, 2011). A major theme in the article was that academia reflects “the American economy as a whole: a self-enriching aristocracy, a swelling and increasingly immiserated proletariat, and a shrinking middle class.” Suggesting that we should aim to “level up . . . not down,” the article’s author noted a disconnect between a “large, public debate . . . about primary and secondary education,” and a “smaller, less public debate about higher education.” Arguing that these should be seen as the same struggle, he ended with a call to arms that professors should marshal their considerable freedom of speech to organize “department by department, institution to institution, state by state and across the nation as a whole” (Deresiewicz, 2011).

Among academic institutions, the field of communication is in a unique position to address these labor and economic issues for at least two reasons. First, it is both victim and perpetrator of many of these trends. At the 2011 International Communication Association conference, Craig Calhoun (2011) noted during his plenary talk that the field of communication stands out for its reliance on adjunct labor (see <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1331/622>). As this casualization of academic labor within our field continues apace, the quantity and quality of our jobs are at stake.

The second reason our field is uniquely positioned to take on these issues is that we offer a clear vantage point on the nexus of power, media, and policy. As communication scholars, we can draw attention to how power operates through media, both by illustrating how media cover important policy issues and by directing attention to the policies that shape our media system. Within our purview is the study of how media help perpetuate the privileged positions of powerful interests, including the broader ideological context in which media maneuver and are designed. By casting a long view on historical processes, including previous struggles and forgotten antecedents that have brought us to a particular critical juncture, we recover the contingency of status quo assumptions and relationships as well as recuperate lost alternatives (Pickard, 2010a).

Policy advocacy and other forms of public scholarship can simultaneously interrogate power arrangements and create affinities with other civil society groups. The ultimate goal, however, should be the articulation of an alternative vision, one that is shielded from market pressures and creates spaces for new social relationships to take hold.

Reclaiming Social Democracy

Toward these objectives, let us contrast corporate libertarianism with what could be considered its mirror opposite: social democracy. More established as a political position in other democratic nations, especially in Northern and Western Europe—and more pronounced within the United States during the 1930s and 1940s (Pickard, 2011a)—social democracy sees a legitimate role for an activist state that allocates resources in an egalitarian fashion. It endeavors to nurture a strong civil society by promoting public investments in libraries, arts, and public education. It assumes that crucial services should not be entirely dependent on the market's mercy but rather seen as public goods that warrant subsidizing. With ideals ranging from universal health care to strong labor unions to viable public media, social democracy seeks to strengthen the foundations for a strong public sector through investments in critical social infrastructures. Within this system, value is determined by the benefit to *all* of society, not by the sole criterion of profit for a relative few.

Clearly there are many shades of political thought between social democracy and corporate libertarianism, but for present purposes it is instructive to tease apart their conflicting logics. For many years in the United States, it was often understood, though always controversial, that the state's duty was to shield vital social services and infrastructures—including sectors of our news media (Pickard, 2011b)—from market logic. But the gradual retreat of the regulatory state and the ascendance of corporate power facilitated by decades-long public relations campaigns, the rise of corporate-funded think tanks and AstroTurf groups, as well as the capture of key institutions like courts and regulatory agencies—has obscured and erased from popular discourse a more nuanced understanding of the social compact between government, corporations, and various publics.

The policies that structure U.S. media—with its gravitation toward oligopolies and excessive commercialism—stand as a poignant reminder of what happens when a vital system is left largely to market governance. Ed Baker (2007) observed that two arguments have long been used to discredit state intervention in cultivating a vibrant media system: first, that the government has no legitimate role in markets, and second, that the First Amendment forbids government intervention in media markets specifically. On the contrary, the government is always involved in markets, though often on behalf of corporate interests. Furthermore, a proscription on government intervention in media, despite arguments to the contrary by Tea Partiers and their ilk, stands on a highly dubious reading of First Amendment freedoms. In fact, if we are to take seriously the United States' democratic rhetoric—as well as important legal precedents⁴—government intervention can be seen as *mandated* to ensure that a vibrant press system is structurally sound and protected (Pickard, 2010b).

In this light, it is difficult to imagine a nongovernmental check on the amassing of corporate power, for it is government that can best alleviate various forms of market failure, particularly markets' inability to support public services ranging from education and health care to public media and the arts.

⁴ See, for example, *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1, 20 (1945). It should also be noted that since our media corporations are now mostly transnational, effective social democratic policies also would have to occur at a supranational level (Pickard, 2007).

This conclusion seems even more apt in the wake of the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which stands to reorder the political landscape along corporate libertarian lines by unleashing nearly unlimited and unaccountable corporate influence into political campaigns.

This does not mean, of course, that the state should dominate civil society; rather, it should help foster the structural conditions necessary for it to thrive. Tony Judt (2010) reminded us that government, in its ideal form, is a collective response to social problems. He noted that a normative foundation for a more social democratic society begins with determining whether a policy is good or just instead of profitable or efficient. Given the discursive shift toward the latter emphasis, Judt observed with resignation that our current age has forever put to rest the notion of an inexorable march toward a more progressive future. He saw clearly that many contemporary struggles in Western democracies must focus on merely retaining what was won by previous generations of reformers, preventing things from worsening, and harboring some ideal of a better society.

As much as I agree with Judt's bleak assessment, I am not so pessimistic as to believe that academics and intellectuals are relegated to the fate of the "bookkeepers" in *Fahrenheit 451*, sheltering lost knowledge and alternative visions for society that someday may flower during more politically opportune times (Bradbury, 1953). However, it *is* our role to remind people of historical and political context and help clarify important policy debates. It is also our duty—and in our best interest—to align with those who are best positioned to contest market fundamentalism.

There are many constituencies with whom we can and should build coalitions of mutual support, for we all stand to lose unless we organize and redouble efforts toward actualizing a more social democratic vision for society. Advocacy around education, labor, and media issues requires a diversity of tactics. Beyond critiquing constructions of knowledge, authority, and power, especially as they operate through media, communication scholars can participate in media activism—ranging from writing op-eds and blog posts to cultivating networks via social media. If we are to engage in this ideological and intellectual struggle, we must aim to speak clearly and boldly through both academic and popular media. We must contextualize the crisis within a larger power struggle and engage in political organizing across and beyond campuses. Toward these goals, we would do well to remember the old slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all."

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