

School Privatization and the Charter School Scam: Corporate America's Neo-Feudal Assault on Education

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"The new feudalism reverses the trend of the past thousand years toward the assumption by the government of basic public amenities like policing, public roads and transport networks, and public schools. In the United States—to a degree unmatched in any other industrial democracy—these things are once again becoming private luxuries, accessible only to the affluent few."—Michael Lind

"The privatization of schooling would produce a new, highly active and profitable industry."—Milton Friedman

American schools are in crisis. This is especially palpable in the inner cities. Although stemming from larger social and societal problems—coupled with a federal policy that facilitates school disruption—the cause of the crisis has been leveled solely on teachers. On a largely bipartisan basis, the solution has been to fire teachers en masse, coupling this with a massive wave of school closings. Subsequently, these public schools are massively privatized, mostly in the form of charter schools. This chain of events, far from unconnected phenomena, are part of the overall project for privatizing public schools. It is an attempt, inter alia, at windfall profits and to overturn the centuries-long commitment of the state to free compulsory education. In other words, neo-feudalism.

Originally focusing on the advocacy of private school vouchers, the architects of school privatization have redirected their energies to the adoption of private charter schools. Since this crucial pivot, the movement has evolved into a much larger coalition, bringing together the forces of right-wing corporatism and Wall Street Democrats, the ostensible allies of labor. It is this convergence that existentially threatens the very notion of public education in America.

Couched in terms of genuine concern for children and through demagogic sloganeering such as "school choice" or even in terms as innocuous as "school reform," proponents of privatization have presented themselves as the saviors of children. [1] Facing largely failing schools—again, due to larger societal factors and lack of school funding in many cases, sometimes deliberately withheld—many parents look favorably at the prospect of sending their children to private voucher or charter schools in the hopes it will provide a more viable alternative. But as the Black Agenda Report observes, "The charter school racket is the perfect Trojan Horse for corporate domination of the classroom, at public expense, opening up a new, wholly subsidized educational 'market' valued at hundreds of billions of dollars a year, in which the public pays and private parties profit." Under the guise of empowering parents and communities, it transfers public assets into private hands.

Behind the scenes of the movement for the replacement of public schools with for-profit charter schools, we find legions of billionaire hedge-fund hyenas, Wall Street—the same rapacious forces that brought us the world economic depression—and cynically opportunistic political operatives working at the behest of corporate and conservative foundations. These are flanked by neoliberal Wall Street Democrats and Republicans, the strongest allies of corporate America. Wall Street wants charter schools. It wants privatization because corporate America sees a potential bonanza in profits, a multibillion dollar opportunity to loot American schools at public expense. Indeed, as Glen Ford notes, “Anyone who believes that the Lords of Capital would finance anything that puts real power in the hands of poor parents, is in need of remedial education.”

In addition to profits, it also affords a further opportunity to smash the remnants of labor unions in America. In a country where labor unions have been in a continual rout for the past four decades—under both Republican and Democratic administrations—teachers unions have become one of the last bastions of militant trade unionism. Privatizing or charterizing public schools continues the attenuation of labor because their proliferation eliminates teachers unions. In fact, the original project to privatize schools, as we shall see, held as paramount the goal of breaking the historic relationship between Black America—the most consistently progressive constituency in America—and labor unions, where blacks were represented disproportionately with respect to their percentage of the overall American population.

Right-Wing Corporate Agenda to Co-Opt Black America

The project for national school privatization largely began as a parochial right-wing initiative focusing primarily on vouchers for private schools. This was a project that, if adopted, would have exacerbated American class separation in addition to reversing the historic commitment to public education. Elite private schools could have—unlike public schools—raised tuition to price out all but the wealthiest students. This would work to cement already increasingly oligarchic tendencies in America.

Moving away from this narrow right-wing initiative, the project for school privatization undertook a dramatic shift beginning in the late 1990s. For years Republicans had tried unsuccessfully to gain legitimacy within the Black community. Republicans had manifold methods for attempting to penetrate the Black community—from running token Black Republicans to bankrolling faux Black intellectuals—all of which were ultimately unsuccessful. Hitherto, not one Black Republican had been elected to a black district since 1939. Eventually, the Right had an epiphany. It realized the cynical use of education was a method by which it could penetrate into the Black community. American Blacks, descendants of enslaved people—who in their plight faced its criminalization—consider education indispensable for social mobility.

Rather than directly attempt to co-opt Blacks through the Republican Party, it would make inroads by working through the Democratic Party itself, where Black America resides politically. School privatization could also potentially drive a wedge between labor and blacks. Towards this end, it would foster and bankroll Black political operatives and opportunists in favor of school privatization. To bring this to fruition the right-wing corporate forces created a synthetic movement for school privatization within the Black community, where hitherto such a demand never existed. This was because, in a paradoxical irony, the progenitors of privatization, by way of school vouchers, were white racists who opposed the integration of schools by the federal government. They wanted segregation academies. Because of this, Blacks, with good reason, associated vouchers with white racists. To make

privatization palatable to the Black community would be an arduous task indeed. But the right-wing operatives were awash with money and a newfangled strategy to inveigle the Black community.

This newfangled right-wing strategy was best elucidated by Glen Ford in the pages of the *Black Commentator* in his exposé of then Newark mayoral candidate Cory Booker, who was an integral part of these efforts. In retrospect, the advent of Booker on the national scene is a historic watershed in American politics. It was an ominous harbinger of what was to come for Black American politics; henceforth Black politicians would come increasingly into the orbit of the corporate embrace. Ford's article "Fruit of the Poisoned Tree: The Hard Right's Plan to Capture Newark, NJ" thoroughly documents Booker as the willing front man of the Hard Right's twofold plan to infiltrate Black Democratic politics and to implement school privatization via vouchers. The incisive article also tells a larger story. It traces the new strategy's very origins.

Those origins ideologically and financially lie in the Bradley Foundation, a wellspring of ultra-conservative political causes, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bradley is the ultra-conservative foundation par excellence—an organization that Republican President George W. Bush described as his "favorite" foundation. Bradley had between 1985 and 1999, according to one count, distributed \$365 million to a myriad of right-wing organizations. School privatization was among the causes that it championed. For example, around 2002 it pledged \$20 million for private schools in Milwaukee for the next decade, while giving a paltry \$60,000 to the public school system in 2000.

The brainchild of the new strategy for co-opting Blacks via an education gambit at Bradley was Michael Joyce, its then president. Far from being interested in genuinely empowering Blacks, Joyce was a man who could care less about the plight of Blacks ill-served by the public education system. In fact, Joyce lauded Charles Murray, author of the infamous American Enterprise Institute (AEI) supported "Bell Curve" theory which posits the dubious notion that Blacks have inferior intelligence. Joyce once asserted "Charles Murray, in my opinion, is one of the foremost social thinkers in this country." AEI, a favorite think tank of Bradley, was a recipient of \$825,000 of Bradley money in 2000.

Bradley Foundation Creates Its Vessel: Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)

For Michael Joyce, his efforts might have not succeeded were it not for his partner in privatization Dr. Howard Fuller, a Milwaukee based self-styled Black nationalist. [2] During the late 1960s and early 1970s Fuller had been part of an effort to create "Malcolm X Liberation University" in Greensboro, North Carolina. For financial reasons this effort proved abortive, with the institution lasting a mere four years. This lesson was not lost on Fuller though; to turn his quixotic Black nationalist desires into a viable movement, he would need money. Being from Milwaukee, he knew where that money resided. What resulted was a paradoxical alliance in which two forces who should be diametrically opposed to each other, worked in tandem. Without qualms, Fuller turned to the Bradley Foundation of Michael Joyce. In Milwaukee, his connections afforded him the opportunity to become superintendent of Milwaukee public schools. In close association with Bradley, he worked to establish seven of the first inner-city voucher private schools. His efforts were frustrated when he faced the Milwaukee school board, where four out of five candidates backed by teachers unions were elected.

After resigning from his position in consternation, Fuller redoubles his Bradley-backed privatization efforts. Fuller was promptly set up at Marquette University—a favorite campus of Bradley and its sister organization the Walton Family Foundation, the philanthropic arm of retail juggernaut Wal-Mart. Operating his own “non-profit” on a \$900,000 annual salary, training and indoctrinating cadre to promote what they sophistically call “school choice” in the Black community.

The Bradley-Walton-Fuller effort to promote voucher and later charter schools crested with the establishment of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). This group, according to one estimate, received \$1.7 million from June 2001 to early 2002, while the Walton Foundation provided \$900,000 for seed money. Such a gilded entrance on the political scene belies any notion of being a grassroots organization. As Glen Ford concludes: “The Black Alliance for Educational Options has no life independent of Bradley and its wicked sister, the Walton Foundation... In a December 2001, report, the liberal People for the American Way (PFAW) asked, rhetorically, is the BAEO a ‘Community Voice or Captive of the Right?’ Transparency in Media, which keeps track of right-wing foundations, describes the BAEO as ‘a project’ of the Bradley Foundation.”

As a testament to the true ideological underpinnings of Cory Booker, Fuller, and their ilk, a BAEO symposium attended by Cory Booker, received \$30,000 from Milton Friedman—the intellectual patron saint of privatization and favored economist of Ronald Reagan, the hero of conservatives. Friedman had his own foundation follow up with \$230,000 for ads promoting school vouchers. The subsequent media blitz which included TV, radio, and print ads was valued at \$3 million, according to one estimate. Plainly, this was no grass roots phenomena of Black folks seeking “school choice”; it was a full-fledged ultra-conservative-backed bacchanalia. Indeed, once the BAEO was well-established, it would achieve a quasi-governmental status under the Republican regime of George W. Bush, becoming a recipient of millions in federal grant money during his tenure as part of Bush’s pro-voucher outreach to the Black community.

Cory Booker: The Corporate Right’s Great Black Hope

Cory Booker, the focus of Glen Ford’s exposé, represented the hopes and aspirations of the new right-wing strategy. The prospect of Booker in a solidly Democratic mayoralty would settle the question of whether or not the Hard Right’s newfangled strategy was a viable option to penetrate the Black political scene. As Ford framed it at the time:

The billionaires who fund the American Hard Right are salivating over the prospect of seizing control of City Hall in Newark, New Jersey, May 14.

They have found their champion: Cory Booker, Black mayoral candidate from the city’s Central Ward, a cynical pretender who attempts to position himself as the common people’s defender while locked in the deep embrace of institutes and foundations that bankroll virtually every assault on social and economic justice in America...

Booker owes his growing national prominence to this crowd, whose influence has provided the 32 year-old with a campaign war chest rivaling that of four-term incumbent Sharp

James. Never has a Newark election been more closely watched by the super-rich and their political network. Booker is their Black Hope for electoral legitimacy. Although only a first-term councilman from a medium-sized city, the former Rhodes Scholar is already at the top of the Right's list of New Black Leaders.

Booker's anointment as a prince in the Hard Right's pantheon is based on his support of public vouchers for private schools. This "movement," the creation of right-wing paymasters like the Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee, and the Walton Family Foundation, Bentonville, Arkansas, hopes to drive a wedge between urban Blacks and the teachers unions. Without amicable relations between these two Democratic pillars, the Party, as we know it, is finished....

Booker is the Right's eager ally. He is adored in the corridors of the Heritage, Hoover, Manhattan and American Enterprise Institutes, think tanks that handle publicity and publication for the Bradley and Walton moneybags.

Normally, that Booker was allied with the fringes of Hard Right in support of school private vouchers might be received with alarm in the Black community. But Booker, much like Obama, ran on vague terms, with no mention of vouchers in his candidacy announcement speech. Instead, he portrayed his opponent, the incumbent mayor Sharpe James, as a tool of downtown business interests; Booker promised a "renaissance for the rest of us."

If his true intentions were not sufficient to raise red flags, his tight partnerships with some of the most reactionary Republicans should have. Booker found good company with former Jersey City Mayor and failed GOP gubernatorial candidate Bret Schundler, another champion of private school vouchers. Along with wealthy Republican businessman Peter Denton, Booker and Schundler founded the non-profit Excellent Education for Everyone. Schundler had earlier received a \$500,000 grant from the Walton Foundation for his "Scholarships for Jersey City Children" non-profit, a large part of which he merely used for his election campaign. Booker and Schundler were also notably present at the creation of the BAEO, making a pilgrimage to Milwaukee for a Bradley funded symposium. Booker would soon join the board of BAEO—along with a catalogue of other right-wing operatives and opportunists such as former congressman Floyd Flake of Queens, the only member of the Congressional Black Caucus to openly endorse private school vouchers at the time. [3]

Most importantly for the fortunes of the young opportunist Booker as a servant of right-wing circles, his standing was solidified when he delivered a speech to the Manhattan institute—a sort of New York media affiliate of Bradley for which it gave \$250,000 in 2000. Here Booker obsequiously delivered on many of the ultra-right's litany of key demands, inveighing against what he called the "old paradigm," which Booker opined was about "race-based machines" securing "big entitlements." A chorus of right-wing voices—spearheaded by noted conservative columnist George F. Will, champion of privatization—soon proceeded to trumpet the cause of Booker. A column by Will about what he called Booker's "renaissance" for Newark explained that Booker's plans are "drawn from thinkers at the Democratic Leadership Council and Manhattan Institute think tank, and from the experiences of others such as Stephan Goldsmith, former Republican mayor of Indianapolis, a pioneer of privatization and faith-based delivery of some government services, and John Norquist, current Democratic mayor of Milwaukee, which has one of the nation's most successful school-choice programs."

What Will's somewhat disingenuous column omitted was the role of Bradley in Milwaukee's dubiously termed "successful" "school-choice" programs, and that the Democratic Leadership Council was the southern based conservative arm of the Democratic Party. Through Booker's access to the right-wing moneybags, he was able to raise \$3 million in contrast to the \$2.5 million of incumbent Sharpe James. Will noted that Booker had raised his millions mostly via "reform-minded" (read exponents of privatization) "supporters in New York financial circles." In truth, these are the same forces that fund corporate right-wing think tanks such as AEI, the Manhattan Institute.

Booker, in a later revelatory Freudian slip, again demonstrated where his true allegiances lie. During the 2012 presidential election season, Booker defended the "good" works done by GOP candidate Mitt Romney's Bain Capital, a predatory firm that had engaged in all manner of asset stripping and jobs destruction. Booker was "nauseated" by "unfair" attacks leveled at Romney and Wall Street. That same year, Booker, still the abject servant of the right-wing elements, delivered a speech on education "reform" (right-speak for privatization) in Jersey City. This big luncheon was paid for by ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) a political arm of the much-dreaded billionaire Koch brothers who fostered the obstructionist Tea Party. Booker was *pari passu* with Republican Governors Chris Christie of New Jersey (a close ally of Booker with whom he agrees with on many issues) and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana at the ultra-conservative luncheon. Booker's rousing speech was laden with anti-union and anti-public school rhetoric, with some accounts stating it was even more ultra-conservative than those given by Jindal or Christie. To be sure, Booker was well in his right-wing element. Booker's actions demonstrated that not only could a Democrat—albeit a nominal one—attack the institution of public schools and unions, but he could also partake in right-wing circles and defend Mitt Romney's Bain Capital, one of the most predatory moneyed interests in America.

Obama Regime: A New Emphasis on Private Charter Schools

The school privatization effort has today reached its apex under the Obama regime. Since developing their early privatization agenda focusing on private school vouchers, the corporate and moneyed interests—the milieu which brought Cory Booker to power—changed their emphasis to "charter schools." From their perspective it is a more viable proposition. Working inside the public school system, these are private institutions for which the public fits the bill. Thus, financially, it is a no lose proposition for their proponents. Charter schools are the faster route to wrest control of public schooling to privatizers than vouchers. The pace at which private voucher schools can be created—which is a one by one basis—is slower than the speed that charter schools can enter the public school system. The term 'charter school,' in truth, a misnomer, also avoids using the word "privatization" which is widely unpopular. Additionally, in terms of targeting the Black community, it obviates the stigma associated with vouchers. Lastly, but certainly not least among considerations, the ranks of the pro-privatization crowd have been bolstered after Wall Street and the Internet rich joined their ranks. As we shall see, Obama, a Democratic president heavily tied to Wall Street banking interests, has served as the front man for privatization via charter schools on the national level, making more strides toward this end than Bush could ever have dreamed of.

The only discernable difference between the Bush II regime and that of Obama vis-à-vis education is in their emphasis. With Bush, Republicans were committed to creating private school vouchers. Their second choice was the charter school, which is now the favored initiative of the Obama regime. Obama has facilitated the firings of teachers en masse in numbers beyond what Bush could have done. By virtue of him being a Democratic president, any potential backlash—that doubtless would have befallen a Republican regime—against his anti-teacher, anti-union and mass school closing policies is muffled. The national level teachers unions ill-served by his policies continue to provide support to him. To add insult to injury, his Teach for America Program uses what are, in effect, “scabs” to replace experienced unionized teachers. These professionalized teachers are replaced by less-paid young, mostly white, teachers, who graduate from a 5 week teacher program with a higher turnover rate than the teachers they replace.

The primary tool of the Obama regime to enact privatization is the “Race to the Top” initiative, its signature education policy. Taking Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” program as his starting point, Obama’s “Race to the Top” program at its core is an instrument of coercion for privatization. It relies on the acquiescence of the states for privatization via charters. The “Race to the Top” awards federal education dollars based on the testing regime, how many teachers are fired, how many schools are closed. This incentivizing of school closings has resulted in an unmitigated wave of school closings involving perhaps hundreds—from Philadelphia to Chicago—in the inner cities. In order to make room for charter schools, there needs to be a rubble for them to replace. Towards this end, the charter school scam continues unabated.

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Notes:

[1] One propagandist film Waiting For Superman plays on this very notion.[2] Fuller also appears in the propagandist film Waiting For Superman to promote the privatization movement he helped to create. His ties and backing from ultra-conservatives is omitted completely from the narrative.[3] Floyd Flake would later create the Edison Schools private school network. Ford also profiles the catalogue of BAEO members in his exposé.

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