

Neoliberalism, Its Effects on Saskatchewan, and a Teacher Educator's Response

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ABSTRACT: The biggest threat to civil society in Canada and the United States is the economic doctrine known as neoliberalism. Sometimes referred to as the corporate agenda, neoliberalism supports the deregulation of industry, privatization of the commons, the weakening of workers' rights, and corporate tax cuts. It first gained acceptance in Canada and the United States during the 1980s, and ever since has had deleterious effects on public services and assets in both countries. The paper asks whether neoliberalism represents a class war waged by the corporate sector and economic elites on the working and middle classes. The province of Saskatchewan in central Canada is used as a case study. The birthplace of public healthcare in Canada, Saskatchewan appears to have experienced a sea change in terms of its dominant political ideology. Indeed, provincial governments across the political spectrum have eschewed the collectivist nature inherent in Saskatchewan's history in favour of adopting neoliberal economic policy. The paper argues whether social democracy is strong enough to withstand neoliberalism. There is a focus on the effects of neoliberalism on the province's public school system, and also a brief discussion of Idle No More, one of the largest Indigenous mass movements in recent history, that first arose in Saskatchewan to resist the federal government's deregulation of Canada's rivers and lakes. Acknowledging that teaching is a political act, the second part of this paper describes pedagogy designed to lift the hegemonic veil for students. This pedagogy uses ideology critique, critical media literacy, and the re-framing of hegemonic neoliberal discourses with progressive discourses.

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism, Social Democracy, Saskatchewan, Critical Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Saskatchewan is one of three prairie provinces in western Canada. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, it has been governed by socialist and social democratic parties (Blakeney, 2008; Warnock, 2004). Perhaps best known as the birthplace of the first publicly funded healthcare system in North America, Saskatchewan also has a strong ethos of public ownership of various industries. The province's progressive roots, however, seem to be withering in an era in which corporate power is becoming firmly entrenched in the body politic. As in other parts of Canada, Saskatchewan first began to embrace this corporate agenda in the 1980s under a Progressive Conservative government. Despite the social democratic Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (NDP) forming government from 1991 to 2007, corporate power grew during this period. In fact, it could be argued that Saskatchewan evolved from its socialist roots in the 1940s and 1950s into a social democratic province in the 1970s, but since then has been embracing the corporate agenda known as neoliberalism.

This paper discusses whether social democracy is too weak an ideology to counter neoliberalism. It briefly describes major tenets of neoliberalism, followed by a discussion of protest politics and social movements. Following a discussion of class warfare today in Canada and the United States, I then turn to a case study of the Saskatchewan experience since the 1980s. I argue that this prairie province is not just experiencing a neoliberal assault, but that for far longer it has been the site for a continuing colonial project exacerbated by neoliberalism. Notwithstanding this, I conclude with a note of optimism with pedagogical suggestions designed to foster political consciousness in future teachers. The stance the article takes is that in order to effectively challenge neoliberalism, citizens must have a political consciousness. The first step, therefore, is to understand what is meant by neoliberalism.

NEOLIBERALISM: LAISSEZ-FAIRE ECONOMICS REVISITED?

Neoliberalism is the term used to describe economic and public policy based on a powerful discursive formation with the aim of entrenching the corporate agenda throughout society. As Gerry Caplan (2012) notes:

“[E]verything that’s happened in the past several years has gone to further empower and enrich the 1 per cent (or maybe the 5 per cent) at the expense of the rest of us. Look anywhere you want. What else

does the universal demand for austerity programs mean? What else does the sudden concerted attack on public sector workers mean? What else does the intransigent line taken by multinational corporations against their unions mean? What else does the demand for “right-to-work” laws mean? What else does the widespread attack on seniors’ pensions mean?”

Citizens in both countries have been inundated with a “permanent campaign of persuasion” to win support for the economic policies favoured by neoliberals and politicians willing to implement them (Kozolanka, 2007, 7). Of course social values are also affected, but economic and political policy is the main focus of neoliberalism (Albo and Fanelli, 2014).

The “liberal” part of neoliberalism refers to its association with the economics of classical liberalism in opposition to the social liberal and state liberal orthodoxies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Both liberal and conservative governments across the U.S. and Canada have passed pro-corporate or neoliberal legislation while touting the free market discourse on domestic and international fronts. Indeed, some provincial social democratic governments, too, have supported neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism has elicited various definitions from academics since the 1970s when the first attempt at implementation into a nation’s economic policy took place in Chile (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009). It has been described as a broad set of macroeconomic policies, as a pro-corporate worldview, and as an approach to public policy leading to the commodification of the commons. For the purpose of explaining this current stage of capitalism to prospective high school teachers of history and social studies, I focus on the following key components of the neoliberal agenda on the domestic front: the deregulation of private industry, increased regulation of the public sector, tax cuts (especially for corporations and the wealthy), privatization of the commons, and the weakening of collective bargaining rights for workers. The major theorists of neoliberalism are Friedrich von Hayek (1944) and, more recently, Milton Friedman (2002).

In high school social studies and history courses, students learn that income inequality, inhumane working conditions and the lack of social safety nets were features of pre-Keynesian (or pre-WWII) government policies. Government regulations on industry were seen as impediments to financial profit for the capitalist class, and were therefore

unacceptable. Through the eighteenth to early-twentieth centuries, supporters of this doctrine preferred the 'invisible hand' of the market to influence economic arrangements and were hostile to the state intervening in economic affairs, especially around regulation of industry. Despite the fact that laissez-faire economics has been largely discredited, it is clear that similar thinking continues to permeate the thinking of many economic and political elites today (Albo and Fanelli, 2014). Yet, contemporary social class issues are virtually ignored in high school today (Orlowski, 2011a).

One particularly effective discourse emanating out of corporate propagandists is the well-known trickle-down theory, that neoliberalism will help everyone no matter their social and economic standing – the deregulated economy will create a rising tide and all of the boats, big and small, will rise with it (Harvey, 2005). Another current powerful discourse in support of corporate tax cuts touts corporations as job creators. Research in Canada and the United States, however, demonstrates that large corporations do not use money from tax cuts to create more jobs; rather, they tend to hoard this money or pay dividends to shareholders (Stanford, 2011; Hungerford, 2012). Despite these findings, the job creator discourse is very powerful and works to gain the public's support for corporate tax cuts. This is clearly the case in Saskatchewan today (McGrane, 2011).

Under the banner of fiscal responsibility, neoliberal supporters in government, the private sector and in the media have been calling for opportunities to profit from privatizing the commons. Indeed, the "politics of austerity...encourage the "total privatization of the public sector" (Albo and Fanelli, 2014, 14). In Canada, entrepreneurial forces are pushing for the creation of a two-tiered healthcare system to replace its treasured, however much-maligned, universal public healthcare system. Most provinces are tacking on "Medical Services Plan" fees to erode universality. Pension plans for public sector workers and the general public are also very much in peril (Kennedy and Press, 2012). The reason given is that it is no longer affordable to fund these public institutions and programs through taxes. Much of the public seems to be understandably confused over the replacement of the social welfare state with discourses of "personal responsibility and individual culpability" (Albo and Fanelli, 2014, 9). Moreover, these deficit discourses are being trumpeted during a period in which the gap in income inequality between the rich and the poor is widening dramatically to proportions not seen since the 1930s (Frank, 2012; Albo, Gindin and Panitch, 2010).

Electoral politics does not seem capable of stopping neoliberalism from dismantling the remaining vestiges of public services and assets.

DEMOCRACY ENACTED THROUGH PROTEST

Albo and Fanelli (2014, 26) contend: "Neoliberalism reinforces the inequalities of social class and the differentiated dependence on markets at the expense....of the egalitarian and developmental processes of democracy." The neoliberal impulse is to reduce our democratic traditions to the procedural democracy of formal elections. Indeed, with the possible exception of the Nordic countries, it appears that social democratic parties have joined their conservative and liberal counterparts in accepting the main tenets of neoliberalism (Albo, Gindin and Panitch, 2010). With an economic convergence among political parties in Canada and the United States, it is little wonder that popular voting in elections have for the most part been on a steady decline since the 1980s. This does not totally translate, however, to the acceptance of neoliberal values promoted by economic and political elites. Democratic avenues for expressing counterhegemonic views still exist.

Amidst countless stories in the United States of home foreclosures, job losses, and increased poverty during the summer of 2011, Occupy Wall Street arose to challenge the growing wealth gap: "We are the 99%" became the slogan of this social movement, the first serious populist resistance to the neoliberal agenda in North America. Likewise, in any European nation where austerity is being touted by the government, massive protests have filled the streets of urban centres. In the spring of 2012, moments after the Quebec government announced university tuition hikes, huge student protests appeared that were so relentless that they helped force a change in government (Giroux, 2012).

In the autumn of 2012, another social movement arose out of Saskatchewan as Indigenous activists reached out to non-Indigenous Canadians in a show of solidarity to challenge corporate hegemony, environmental degradation and the weakening of democracy (Dobbin, 2013). The flashpoint for the Idle No More movement was the federal government's two omnibus budget bills, C-38 and C-45, which effectively gutted the regulation of Canada's lakes and rivers. The Idle No More movement continues to attract support across the world as progressive and concerned citizens join with Indigenous peoples (Kin-nda-nilmi Collective, 2014; Georgetti and Barlow, 2013). Indeed, since 2006 there has been a significant increase across the world in citizen protest in favour of increased human rights, economic justice and global justice,

and against the failure of political representation (Ortiz, Burke, Berrada and Cortes, 2013).

To counter these democratic expressions of civil disobedience, however, neoliberalism is focusing more and more on disciplining dissent (Albo and Fanelli, 2014). Technological advances have made surveillance a normal part of government activity. And as anyone attending neoliberal events such as the 2010 G20 meetings in Toronto can attest, the state has readily utilized authoritarian measures to crack down on these albeit unevenly accepted avenues of democratic expression.

Despite the state response to dissent, however, it is important for students to note that the creation of the social welfare state was helped through the protests of the 1920s and 1930s. Activist trade unions in Canada and the United States were essential to the gradual acceptance of Keynesian economic policy into the body politic and the social fabric of both nations after the Second World War. The conflicts of the past provide inspiration to resist corporate hegemony today. This is crucial because since the 1980s economic elites have waged a vicious attack on the social welfare state.

IS THIS WHAT CLASS WARFARE LOOKS LIKE?

The term class warfare means different things to different people. It is a provocative phrase that elicits anger from both the right and the left. I will not suggest a definitive definition for class warfare. Rather, the debates about what is occurring in Canada is instructive. When one considers the dramatically increasing gaps in wealth, there can be little doubt that neoliberalism is indeed “a project aimed at the restoration of class power” (Anijar and Gabbard, 2009, 45–46). Harvey (2005, 202) states that “if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is.”

Although it is difficult to prove that the extreme rise in wealth inequality since the 1980s is the result of neoliberalism, it is clear that the two occurred simultaneously. A look at specific neoliberal policies over the past three decades leads one to at least inquire about causality. During the 1980s, Reagan Republicans began touting deregulation as a way for the economy to flourish (Krugman, 2009; Laxer, 1999; McQuaig, 1998). This was instrumental for the neoliberal agenda to gain traction in the American economy. Today, it is clear that the savings and loans scandal of the 1980s and the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2007-08 are directly related to the deregulation of the financial industry (Frank, 2012). Of course, deregulation was also responsible for the 2010 British Petroleum

Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico that resulted in eleven worker deaths and the largest oil spill in the history of the oil industry with two-hundred gallons of crude oil spilling into the Gulf every day for eighty-seven straight days (Orlowski, 2011b). In Canada, deregulation of the private sector has resulted in too many catastrophes. To name but a few recent examples: the 2013 Lac Megantic train explosion that resulted in forty-seven deaths (Campbell, 2013); the E. Coli outbreak at XL Foods in Alberta in 2012; and in Toronto, the 2008 Maple Leaf Foods listeriosis tragedy that resulted in twenty deaths (Rouseau, 2013).

In *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) reports that the United States has the fourth-highest inequality level in the OECD, after Chile, Mexico and Turkey. Moreover, the average income of the top 10 percent of Americans was \$114,000, nearly 15 times higher than that of the bottom 10 percent, whose average income was \$7,800. By comparison, the ratio was 10 to 1 in the mid 1980s, and 12 to 1 in the mid 1990s. Keeping in mind that neoliberalism began to gain traction in the U.S. during the Reagan presidency of the 1980s, it is clear from the OECD numbers that there is a strong connection between a rising wealth gap and neoliberalism policy. Moreover, in 2009, nearly 44 million Americans were living in poverty, which was four million more than the previous year (Herbert, 2011). In terms of child poverty, 23 percent of American children live in poverty, which is barely better than the situation in Romania (Monsebraaten, 2012). The growing inequality trend is similar in Canada. UNICEF reports that Canada ranks twenty-fourth out of thirty-five industrialized nations with a child poverty rate of 13.3 percent.

Another feature of neoliberalism pertains to work stoppages and the attack on unions. Recent American statistics attest to the increase in employee lockouts: "The number of strikes has declined to just one-sixth the annual level of two decades ago ... [l]ockouts, on the other hand, have grown to represent a record percentage of the nation's work stoppages" (Greenhouse, 2012). There is growing evidence that this strategy is gaining further traction in Canada as well. The day after Michigan passed a "so-called right-to-work law aimed at weakening unions in that state," the Canadian federal government passed Bill C-377 in the House of Commons (Walkom, 2012). This new law was "designed to tie the unions up in red tape and – its backers hope – embarrass labour's leadership" (Walkom, 2012). Bill C-377, while temporarily halted due to the prorogation of Parliament in 2013, was reintroduced in the House

of Commons in September 2014 and aims to impart a host of new financial reporting practices on unions as part of its generalized attack against organized labour (Stanford, 2014). Indeed, Canadian workers have learned that “[a]cross the 1990s, the employment relationship was re-worked to expose workers more forcefully to ‘market forces’” (Albo and Fanelli, 2014, 11). The Fordist arrangement between labour and capital has been torn asunder.

Another plank in the neoliberal arsenal involves the commons. The current trend toward austerity is most often a precursor to privatizing components of the public sector. Indeed, privatization of the public sector is “enforced by a ‘disciplinary democracy’ that ever more deploys anti-democratic measures that marginalizes, and even criminalizes, dissent in defense of austerity and market freedoms” (Albo and Fanelli, 2014, 7). The display of extreme force used by the security apparatuses of the state during the G20 protests in 2010 attests to this. These included CSIS, the RCMP, the OPP, and the military.

Since the 1980s, Canadian and American citizens have been inundated with a set of discourses and legislation designed to further the economic power of the elites. These discourses have evolved into an extremely powerful discursive formation that comprises the underpinnings of neoliberalism: corporate tax cuts, deregulation, privatization, free markets, and union busting. The neoliberal paradigm provides the basis for a rejuvenated class war. Conservative, liberal, and even social democratic governments have supported the dismantling of public services and assets, as well as the weakening of democracy. Saskatchewan, a province that for the most part was built on social democratic principles, is a case in point.

SASKATCHEWAN: A CASE STUDY

“[T]he NDP and the Saskatchewan Party have accepted, to varying degrees, that labour union freedoms are antagonistic to the free market principles they both endorse” (Smith, 2011, 123). The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) first came to power in Saskatchewan in 1944, becoming the first socialist government in North America. This was the first of five straight electoral victories during which time they enacted policies and laws for the general welfare of society at large as opposed to the narrow interests of the captains of industry. Led by Premier Tommy Douglas, some of the CCF’s most notable accomplishments include the first Bill of Rights in North America (1947), the first Arts Board in North America (1948), and the rural electrification program

(1949). In 1961, the CCF evolved into the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), with closer ties to organized labor (McGrane, 2011; Laxer, 1999; Whitehorn, 1992). Shortly after this, the Saskatchewan NDP passed what many consider to be its crowning achievement: a universal public healthcare system. During the years 1971-1982, the NDP returned to government and, led by Premier Al Blakeney, passed progressive legislation in support of labour and the agricultural sector (Blakeney, 2008). Many crown corporations were created in the energy sectors, telecommunications, car insurance, and the burgeoning potash industry.

In October, 1982, the 11-year rein of the Saskatchewan NDP government came to an end with the election of the Grant Devine Progressive Conservatives (PC). This shift from the NDP to the PCs established the first stages of neoliberalism. During Devine's second term as premier, the PCs sold off some of Saskatchewan's crown corporations, including SaskMinerals and the especially lucrative Potash Corporation. When the PCs broke their election promise not to sell off the public utilities and attempted to sell the natural gas division of SaskPower, the collectivist impulse of the Saskatchewan public was activated (McGrane, 2011). Massive public sentiment against the privatization of SaskPower was so intense that the PCs backed down (Pitsula and Rasmussen, 1990). The Progressive Conservatives reduced spending on social programs, curbed the power of labour unions, and brought in massive tax cuts. In 1991 voters showed their displeasure by returning the NDP to power in a landslide (Pitsula and Rasmussen, 1990).

The Roy Romanow-led NDP governed with a decidedly neoliberal perspective, far removed from the strong social democratic values of the Blakeney-led government of the 1970s (McGrane, 2011; Smith, 2011). Romanow's first term was marked by a massive effort to "eliminate the deficit with the social democratic goal of redistributing wealth and the need to maintain economic competitiveness in an era of globalization" (McGrane, 2011, 95). Although neoliberal policy prescriptions dominated during this first term, the NDP showed some resistance as they raised corporate taxes and introduced a progressive 10 percent deficit surtax on all taxpayers.

Romanow's second and third terms, however, showed a markedly clear move toward attracting business investment simultaneously with social spending cuts. As well, corporate tax cuts and low royalties from resource extraction combined with a regressive sales tax increase (McGrane, 2011). The NDP, long time supporters of the province's trade union movement, did little to help organized labour during the Romanow

years (Smith, 2011). The NDP's desire to be economically competitive with its Alberta neighbor led to the erosion of workers' rights, including erecting barriers to organizing unions in previously non-unionized sectors. By the end of Romanow's tenure as premier in 2001, personal income tax cuts had been added to the NDP financial plan. The strategy of tax cuts continued when Lorne Calvert became premier in 2001, as the governing NDP attempted wealth redistribution through raising the minimum wage and rebates from publicly owned utilities (McGrane, 2011). Despite the decrease in resource royalties and the lowering of "the corporate income tax rate from 17% to 12%" (McGrane, 2011, 102), it was not enough for the NDP to win a fifth term. In 2007, the newly branded Saskatchewan Party formed government in 2007.

In 2007, voters elected a new government under the moniker, the Saskatchewan Party, a coalition of former Conservatives and Liberals. The Saskatchewan Party, led by popular premier Brad Wall, embraced neoliberalism even more than Grant Devine's PC government or the NDP governments of Romanow and Calvert. That said, the collectivist nature of Saskatchewan's political culture has resulted in a slower acceptance of neoliberalism than one might expect (McGrane, 2011).

Based primarily on resource extraction and agriculture, Saskatchewan has been enjoying a period of unprecedented economic prosperity for the past decade or so. Since 2008, 26 percent of Saskatchewan's total government revenue is from non-renewable resources, mostly from potash and oil, which is even slightly more than what Alberta derives from its non-renewable resources (Enoch, 2013). Because of its dependence on external capital and markets, Saskatchewan is increasingly being integrated into continental and global capitalism.

Major problems arise when there is an over-reliance on income for government coffers from resource extraction. The cyclical nature of volatile global commodity prices results in an unstable situation in which governments cannot depend upon this income to adequately fund social programs, public healthcare and public education. Saskatchewan has recently experienced this situation as "resource revenues came in \$563 million lower than was expected in the 2012-13 budget," but it was even worse in 2009 when falling potash prices resulted in a "\$1.8 budget shortfall" (Enoch, 2013). As predicted, the current Saskatchewan government has been reducing its funding for the social welfare state, including public education and higher education (McGrane, 2011).

Rampant extraction of resources is particularly hard on Saskatchewan's Indigenous peoples, many of who still live off the land and

waterways. Indeed, “[f]or land-based people the natural environment is the heart of their economies and their very existence” (Settee, 2011, 74). This has not been a new phenomenon for the province’s Indigenous peoples, however. Settee (2011, 76) sums up this relationship thusly: “In spite of Saskatchewan’s social democratic political tradition that emphasizes egalitarianism, colonialism has been a consistent reality for the province’s Indigenous people.” Clearly, colonial attitudes have informed all of Saskatchewan’s provincial administrations, regardless of political ideology. This is an aspect of the political culture that must be addressed by critical pedagogy.

Although Saskatchewan has now been governed by provincial governments influenced by neoliberalism for some thirty years, the current Saskatchewan government is moving further in its priorities from the province’s social democratic and collectivist roots. Indeed, Saskatchewan is embracing neoliberalism more ambitiously than ever before.

SASKATCHEWAN TODAY: A NEOLIBERAL PROVINCE

Trickle-down economics is clearly not working in Saskatchewan. Despite the newfound prosperity generated by the recent resource boom, the province’s poverty rate of 15.3 percent remains among the highest in Canada (Hunter, Douglas and Pedersen, 2008). Also striking is the fact that this poverty is not distributed evenly across racial lines: excluding people living on reserves, Aboriginal people, who comprise approximately 16 percent of Saskatchewan’s population, are almost four times as likely to be living in poverty than non-Aboriginals (Hunter and Douglas, 2006). This race/class intersection is not only the result of neoliberalism, however. Indeed, it seems to be caused by long entrenched colonial attitudes among the province’s settler population (Settee, 2011)

The situation is especially grim with respect to child poverty. Again, despite record royalties from potash and other resources, Saskatchewan still has the third highest child poverty rate among Canadian provinces (Douglas and Gingrich, 2009). In 2007, the last year for which there are accurate figures, the rate of under 18-year olds living in poverty was 16.7 percent (Douglas and Gingrich, 2009). Child poverty is even more pronounced for Aboriginal families in Saskatchewan as a staggering 45 percent of Aboriginal children live in low-income families, a proportion six times greater than that of non-Aboriginal children. While disadvantage was less pronounced (but still significant) for Metis children at 28.3 percent, an overwhelming 57.9 percent of First Nations children in

Saskatchewan regularly go without some of the basic necessities of life (Douglas and Gingrich, 2009). As race and social class are major determinants of educational achievement as well as future life chances, to be born poor and Aboriginal in Saskatchewan effectively condemns a person to a life of poverty.

The job creator discourse has been particularly effective in normalizing neoliberalism in Saskatchewan. Neoliberal government policy has used this discourse to implement massive corporate tax cuts. As mentioned earlier, since the resource boom hit Saskatchewan in 2007, the corporate tax rate has been reduced from 17 to 12 percent with a further 2 percent cut recently announced (Enoch, 2013). As well, taxes for small businesses in Saskatchewan have recently been cut from 4.5 to 2 percent, and the rate for the wealthiest individuals has been reduced to 15 percent (Enoch, 2013). Almost every provincial budget since 2000 highlights tax cuts as a government priority. (Government of Saskatchewan Budgets, 2013).

This significant revenue shortfall leaves the provincial government with few options. The Saskatchewan government's adherence to neoliberalism is evident in its attempts to make up some of the revenue shortfall by "raiding crown dividends, higher tuition fees, the erratic and haphazard cuts to programs and services and growing public debt" (Enoch, 2013). Moreover, funding cuts have been employed rather than adopting progressive tax strategies and resource royalty rates successful in places like Scandinavia (Moore, 20013).

In 2012, the Saskatchewan government further indicated its support for neoliberalism by launching an attack on labour rights. Bill 85 attempted to make it much easier for employers to claim the work of their employees to be an essential service, thereby negating their collective bargaining rights. This attack, however, suffered a setback when the provincial Court of Queen's Bench sided with the province's unions by declaring the province's essential service legislation unconstitutional (CCPA, 2012). In April 2014, the Saskatchewan government passed a new Saskatchewan Employment Act, which makes union membership more difficult, and gives workers fewer rights and protections. As expected, the province's newspapers hailed the law as a victory in which labour was outsmarted by a conservative government in a "labour war" (Mandryk, 2014).

Another major plank in the Saskatchewan government's neoliberal agenda is its preference to privatize the commons. For example, in the melee caused by the federal Conservative government's omnibus

Bill-C38, the Saskatchewan government moved to privatize 1.77 million acres of community pasture lands (Arbuthnot and Schmutz, 2013). This move also effectively negates environmental regulations of the lands, which is consistent with the province's stance on deregulating industry. Privatization of the commons is also on the table: in October 2014, Premier Brad Wall announced that his government is considering "the idea of allowing private companies to charge people directly for diagnostic medical scans" (French, 2014, A1). This is a major shift away from the publicly-funded Medicare system that first appeared in Saskatchewan in 1962. Equally disturbing, the public school system is also being targeted.

THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT ON SASKATCHEWAN'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

A major objective of Canadian social democracy in its ideal form is to protect the commons, especially public education and public healthcare. The Saskatchewan NDP that governed from 1991-2007 was more true to this aspect of social democracy than in other areas. The change in government to the more corporate-friendly Saskatchewan Party has resulted in the province's public school system being particularly vulnerable to the neoliberal threat.

Inadequate funding for Saskatchewan public schools has resulted in a deterioration of learning conditions for all students, but some students more than others. Since 2007 education assistants for special needs students have seen their numbers reduced by 350 full-time positions at the same time that student enrollment has increased by 5,676 and special needs students rose by 764 (CUPE, 2011). The decision to make these cuts during an era of economic prosperity in order to facilitate corporate and personal tax cuts seems particularly mean spirited. At the least, it is ideological. Moreover, in late 2011, the Saskatchewan government announced that it is "committed to funding Associate [Christian] Schools at 80% of the provincial per-student average" (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011).

The most visible manifestation of neoliberal influence in public education is seen in the manner in which the Saskatchewan government has treated the province's normally passive 12,000 teachers. Working without a contract since August 2010, teachers responded to stalled contract negotiations by walking out of the classroom for the first time in Saskatchewan's history for a one-day strike (Graham,

2011). In early 2013, the Saskatchewan government unilaterally increased the number of hours teachers spend in the classroom (French, 2013b). In May 2014, 64 percent of the province's teachers rejected a new contract, demonstrating a degree of militancy rarely seen with this particular group of workers.

The most obvious neoliberal influence, however, involves teacher accountability. In early 2013 the Saskatchewan government announced plans to increase the frequency of these tests to levels beyond anywhere else in Canada (French, 2013a). At a time when most jurisdictions in both Canada and the U.S. are moving from standardized assessment (Orlowski, 2013a), the Saskatchewan Education Ministry stated that by 2016, "students across the province will participate in annual standardized tests, including evaluations of kindergarteners and pre-kindergarteners, readings tests for Grades 1 to 3, and exams in science, math and English for students in grades 4 through 12" (Couture, 2013). Predictably, this led to an outcry from the Saskatoon Teachers Association (French, 2013a). As well, education professors from the province's two universities went public in newspapers, radio and television citing numerous studies to explain why the plan was wrong-headed (See McVittie, 2013; Orlowski, 2013; Spooner and Orlowski, 2013; Malone, 2013). It is noteworthy that in this era of tax cuts and reduced funding for public education, the Saskatchewan government earmarked \$5.9 million annually for this venture.

Given the research, it is particularly telling that the Saskatchewan government plans to spend significant tax dollars to increase the frequency of standardized exams beyond anywhere else in Canada. In fact, most other provinces are moving to a random sampling approach to standardized testing (Spooner and Orlowski, 2013). It is also disconcerting that they are increasing testing at the same time they are reducing funding in other important areas of public education. When resistance to standardized testing strengthened, the Minister of Education called the term itself "too toxic," and proceeded to rebrand this assessment strategy as "common assessment" (Spooner and Orlowski, 2014). This Orwellian wordplay indicates the strength of support the Saskatchewan government has for neoliberalism. The silence of the media on this rebranding is also telling. It should not be surprising to learn that corporate media have corporate interests. By corollary, corporate media is clearly on the side of neoliberalism.

CHALLENGING NEOLIBERALISM IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

As Apple (2004, 14) notes: “[A]n understanding of how the control of cultural institutions enhances the power of particular classes to control others can provide needed insight into the way the distribution of culture is related to the presence or absence of power in social groups.” When it comes to understanding politics, a significant portion of the population is unable to do so; they are politically uninformed and unaware of how economic power operates. This is likely a reason why neoliberalism has been able to replace the Keynesian model without very much effective resistance. In *Critical Democracy and Education*, Kincheloe (1999, 73) suggests using critical pedagogy so that students become politically conscious: “the curriculum becomes a dynamic of negotiation where students and teachers examine the forces that have shaped them and the society in which they live.” Bearing this important point in mind, the first concept I teach in every social science methods courses to preservice teachers is ideology critique.

Ideology Critique

In order to help students understand the major political ideologies, I first have students categorize issues as either social or economic (see Appendix 1). For example, on the social spectrum minority rights are on the left side, while the conservative pro-life and pro-death penalty positions are on the right. On the economic spectrum, tax cuts are on the right side, while publicly funded social welfare programs are on the left.

In Canada, both conservative ideology and liberal ideology are positioned on the right, although liberalism is slightly to the left of conservatism. In its ideal form social democracy is on the left side of both the social and economic spectrum.

Social democrats and liberals often agree on social issues. In Canada, for example, the federal NDP and the Liberals agree on rights for Aboriginals and LGBTQT people. They usually differ on economic issues, however, as their traditional stances on trade unions and free trade indicate. The social democratic NDP, however, has accepted neoliberalism. This approach allows me to demonstrate the extent to which each of the parties stands in relation to the neoliberal agenda. In this way, students comprehend that neoliberalism is an economic paradigm with significant social and political consequences. In recent years, I include a discussion of democratic socialism, and how it differs from neoliberalism and other ideologies on economic issues. By the end of every course I teach in Teacher Education, the student has at least a basic understanding of

political ideology in relation to various social and economic issues. The next pedagogical step is to emphasize the role of the corporate media as a hegemonic device.

THE CASE FOR CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy can take two basic forms: one looks at the pleasures within a capitalist society and how certain groups are represented; the other looks at politics and the media's role in shaping public opinion. This second approach is the one I focus on, especially around neoliberalism, since it enables the teacher to illuminate the effects of various hegemonic discourses used by the media that portray the poor as lazy, or public sector workers as entitled while ignoring the growing wealth gap. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) point out, the major role of the corporate media is to "manufacture consent," to shape the collective consciousness in ways that further the interests of the elite. This is accomplished not only by *how* issues are covered, but by *which* issues receive coverage.

There are myriad examples of the media ignoring or distorting certain events and policies if there is a perceived threat that the public might turn against the ruling classes. For example, over the past few years there has been a concerted effort in many Western nations to weaken or eliminate altogether pensions plans for public sector workers. Corporate media have virtually ignored the fact that the attack on pensions is occurring across most western nations. Students come to understand this omission as a hegemonic strategy.

Another hegemonic strategy that I use in teacher education involves understanding the power of language. We are living in a time in which bias, or "spin", has been hyperbolized to extreme proportions. As an example of current spin, the tendency to limit workers' collective bargaining rights is not called union busting; rather, the mainstream media and neoliberal politicians refer to it as labour flexibility. Lowering the minimum wage is called right-to-work legislation.

The Orwellian spin strategy has recently been put to good use in Canada. In 2011, the federal Conservative government passed a bill called "Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act" that effectively ended the grain price controls put in place in 1935 through the Canadian Wheat Board. This creates a clear disadvantage for the small wheat and barley farmers. Right on cue, the neoliberal *National Post* ran a headline equating the Wheat Board to an "iron fist" (Gunter, 2011). Students were able to understand how corporate media is a hegemonic device.

A counterhegemonic strategy that I have found successful involves students accessing and assessing media sources. Students demonstrate the degree to which they have become adept at explaining cultural struggles in ideological terms in their "current events" presentations. Each student chooses an article from one of the mainstream newspapers or from an alternative news source such as Rabble.ca, most of which come from the internet. The chosen article must address a cultural issue pertaining to race, class, gender, sexuality, war, or the environment. Each student provides a 2-page written analysis to address issues of bias by showing which groups benefit and which ones lose from the given ideological perspective. They must offer their thoughts about who was quoted and why, and which affected groups were excluded. Each student must also present his or her findings to the class with a four-to-five minute presentation.

Some students choose only articles from mainstream sources, while others willingly, even enthusiastically, search the alternative sources. This has worked well, pedagogically speaking, because students often choose articles on similar topics – climate change and the 2011 Canadian election come to mind – and the ideologies emanating from mainstream and alternative sources are not difficult to discern. For another example, students compared how mainstream news and alternative media outlets differed in their coverage of the Idle No More social movement. Most preservice teachers I recently taught were completely unaware of the role the federal Conservatives' omnibus budget bill had on the rise of Idle No More and its focus on the deregulation of Canada's fresh waterways. Media bias is quite apparent with such pedagogy.

These assignments offer preservice teachers a framework in which to critique the media in terms of the ideological influences of journalists. Through this process, they come to understand how most mainstream media often reflect the views of powerful interests. Indeed, when students challenge the language and the assumptions that many journalists use, they see how the hegemonic function of the media works in the interests of large corporations and other privileged groups. Some students learn to see past the effects of a false political consciousness.

In recent years, I have had students look specifically for neoliberal policy being promoted or challenged by some politicians or business representatives in the corporate media. They look for news articles discussing deregulation, privatizing the commons, unions or tax cuts and analyze the language used. The goal of this exercise is two-fold: first, to demonstrate to students the proliferation of neoliberal policies; and

second, to help them comprehend how language leads many people to believe that work stoppages are most often a result of striking workers rather than lockouts.

Students come to understand that the dominant discourses used in corporate media support the interests of elites over the common good; indeed, they support profits over broad, societal interests. The dominant neoliberal discourses in the corporate media over the course of neoliberalism – tax cuts, deregulation, debt reduction, cuts to social programs and free global markets – have been the building blocks for a resurgence in economic and political power for elites in North America.

RE-FRAMING DISCOURSE

I have recently been engaging in a more sophisticated kind of media literacy, one based on reframing political discourse from different ideological perspectives (Lakoff, 2004). The basic theory behind reframing is to address the observation that people who are strongly influenced by any particular ideology find it difficult to listen to facts that might shake their beliefs. The facts do not seem to matter; the intended listener most often remains entrenched in their belief. Rather than become frustrated, progressive ideologues need to use positive discourses on policy that rely on progressive values and language. In other words, rather than using the familiar frames of neoliberalism, progressives ought to use ones based on social democratic values.

One example from the teacher education program may help to explain the value in reframing. For the neoliberal agenda to continue, significant numbers of poor and working-class people must vote against their own best interests, or not vote at all. The necessary reframing efforts on the part of neoliberal conservatives were successful because a commonly held belief today is that conservative ideas are populist, while liberal or progressive ideas are elitist (Frank, 2012). To counter this, I use a critical pedagogy that has the preservice teachers reframe neoliberal arguments using progressive values. For example, neoliberal politicians often attack any notion of increasing the mandated minimum wage by calling it antithetical to business success. Instead of defending an increase in the minimum wage, one student reframed the debate and focused on the value of prosperity for all who work hard. This is an idea that people across the ideological spectrum could support.

Another student produced a defense of taxes not by buying into the neoliberal frames of tax relief or taxes as burden, but by using a social democratic frame – fair tax reform – which indicates that wealthy people

and corporations should pay their fair share, and that taxes are an investment for the future prosperity of everyone's children. This led to a reframing of a very contentious local issue that recently made headlines far beyond the University of Saskatchewan. The university's Board of Governors was trying to implement a major cost-cutting exercise called TransformUs (Hill and French, 2014a). Some students in my classes, all of whom were recently elected to the College of Education Student Council, quickly organized a large student rally. They reframed the cost-cutting TransformUs to DefendUs and by all accounts, the student action was a catalyst that led to the firing of the University president (Hill and French, 2014b). My students became acutely aware of the role that political agency can have in exacting positive change, and found themselves explaining to the media that the university needs to be adequately funded (see Figure 1).

Of course, media access and media compliance are usually important obstacles to these progressive frames becoming commonly accepted. For now, however, if teachers can comprehend corporate media neoliberal discourses, they should be better able to help their students deconstruct the bias that they are experiencing. After all, a major objective of critical media literacy is to help students interpret the news rather than simply absorb it without reflection. This is a crucial pedagogical strategy to develop a political consciousness in which individuals understand and defend their own best interests.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

Neoliberalism replaced Keynesianism in Canada and the US as the dominant socio-economic and political paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s. The Saskatchewan experience demonstrates that social democracy is not strong enough to withstand these powerful forces to increase corporate profits at any cost. If not social democracy, then effective resistance to neoliberalism is more likely to emanate from a social movement based on democratic socialist values. Compared to other provinces, Saskatchewan is in a unique position for a variety of reasons. Bucking the global trend, its economy is actually growing more than ever before, thanks to the demand for natural resources the province is bestowed with. One trend the province is subscribing to in a major way, however, is its embrace of neoliberalism. Saskatchewan governments ostensibly representing various political ideologies have been adhering to the major tenets of neoliberalism ever more so since the 1980s. These include deregulation of private industry,

the dismantlement of the public sector, corporate tax cuts, privatization of the commons, and the curtailment of free collective bargaining rights for workers.

Neoliberalism has had particularly grave consequences for Saskatchewan's public school system. Tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations mean fewer dollars for the public school system and more private schooling. Moreover, the current attack on the province's teachers and their union is also in keeping with the neoliberal doctrine. Paradoxically, the deregulation of private enterprise is occurring simultaneously with increased teacher accountability. This highlights the insidious discourse of neoliberalism; namely, that private enterprise is to be trusted while the opposite is true of public workers such as teachers.

It is also unconscionable that Saskatchewan's Aboriginal peoples have not been given the same opportunities to benefit from the relatively prosperous economy. The long history of white settler racism toward Aboriginal peoples in the province and elsewhere is still clearly present. Yet, where there is power, there is also resistance. The Idle No More movement is a case in point. This is where hope resides, even in a province that has long held onto colonial values, and seemingly accepted the neoliberal doctrine. Perhaps the citizens of Saskatchewan, including its teachers, are waking up to the fact that public services and assets are not to be taken for granted. In fact, the social democratic drift toward neoliberalism in Saskatchewan might suggest that democratic socialism may be a more viable alternative to the dismantling of oppositional groups, unions and progressive social forces more generally.

APPENDIX A

An effective way for students to understand political ideology is to consider all issues as either economic or social. Economic issues are those that represent significant amounts of money, while social issues do not. For example, capital punishment is a social issue while tax reform is an economic issue. The case can be made that some issues are both social and economic – healthcare is a case in point – yet, to save on getting mired in semantics, the basic economic/social distinction is useful.

With political ideologies and political issues divided into the economic and the social, students are able to make headway around why certain media are called left-wing by some, and the very same

media outlets are called right-wing or right-leaning by others. For example, during the past few federal elections in Canada, leaders of the federal Liberal Party appeal to social democrats (that is, supporters of the New Democratic Party) as having values that have appeared out of the same concerns for justice, and that their vote should switch to the Liberals. The truth of the matter is that on social issues, they are correct. On economic issues, however, the two parties diverge significantly – the Liberals are to the right of center, closer to where the Conservative Party are positioned, while the NDP are to the left of centre. (Note: The point about the Liberal Party being left-wing on social issues and right-wing on economic issues is rarely mentioned in the corporate media.)

Figure 1: Left and Right on the Social and Economic Spectra

| Social | | |
|-----------------------|---|------------------------|
| LW | I | RW |
| - pro-choice | I | - pro-life |
| - anti-death penalty | | - pro-death penalty |
| - pro minority rights | | - anti-minority rights |

ASSIGNMENT

1. Research the platforms of the following Saskatchewan political parties:
 - The Saskatchewan Party - The New Democratic Party

| Economic | | |
|--|---|-----------------------------|
| LW | I | RW |
| - strong social welfare state | I | - anti social welfare state |
| - pro publicly funded universal healthcare | | - for profit healthcare |
| - pro-union | | - anti-union |
| - wealthy pay tax at a higher rate | | - tax cuts for all |

2. Research the platforms of the following Canadian political parties:
 - The Liberal Party
 - The Conservative Party
 - The New Democratic Party
 - The Bloc Quebecois
 - The Green Party of Canada

3. Use the social scale or the economic scale to place the various political parties.

Be prepared to explain why you placed each one where you did.

- (i) The two main Saskatchewan political parties
- (ii) The five main Canadian federal political parties

| | | |
|--------------|--|----|
| Social | | |
| LW | | RW |
| | | |
| Social Scale | | |

- (iii) Using a separate set of axes to represent the economic and social scales, place the letter representing each of the following issues on one of the scales. Be prepared to explain why you placed each one where you did.

| | | |
|----------|--|----|
| Economic | | |
| LW | | RW |
| | | |

- A – capital punishment
- B – increased rights of gay people
- C – allowing industry to self-regulate
- D – tax cuts for all
- E – increased funding for public education
- F – pro-life (on abortion issue)
- G – pro-choice (on abortion issue)
- H – government regulations of the financial industry
- I – increased military spending

- J – increased social welfare spending
- K – private or 2-tiered healthcare system
- L – subsidized daycare
- M – the Idle No More movement
- N – “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” philosophy
- O – support for unions
- P – banning sex education in schools
- Q – honouring Aboriginal land treaties
- R – support for public transit
- S – progressive tax reform (eg., raising taxes on large corporations)
- T – support for using replacement workers during a strike

Figure 1: College of Education, University of Saskatchewan students protest TransformUs cost-cutting exercise (2014, May 21)



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