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American Education: Reform or Revolution Represent Our Resistance By Dr. Lenore J. Daniels, PhD BC Editorial Board

...We all know the same truths and our lives consist of how we choose to distort it.

-Woody Allen, *Woody Allen: A Documentary*

Ignorance is a cure for nothing.

-W.E.B. DuBois, "Letter to a Negro Schoolgirl"

Like most concerned citizens, I followed the Chicago Teachers Union fight against the liberal Democratic Machine in Chicago and the market capitalists. Born and raised in Chicago, I am a product of both the private and public institutions there, having graduated from a Catholic elementary school, and after attending two dismal years at a Catholic, all girl-finishing school, graduated from a public high school. I received my undergraduate degree from a four-year institution but my master's degree from a public institution, and finally my doctorate at a private institution.

Having been a college teacher for 25 years, I know the plight of teachers, and I have had my experiences with unions...

The Chicago Teachers Union strike was a victory for the students, the parents, the teachers - and the union. The union and supporters claim a labor victory. I will take their word for it. It was a victory for

labor. Against the tide to privatize education and enslave teachers, this is a victory.

Well, I am all for labor union victories. Historically, and certainly in my personal experience, unions mirror the hierarchical structure of the State and, and to keep the profitable peace with the State, sell a large portion of its membership down the river. No, education is my concern. I have these strange ideas and pose a different set of questions. What is this thing called education today? What are students learning? What is the content of this thing called education? Specifically, what ideas are disseminated and regurgitated?

Are the battles in education about reform or revolution?

Let me step back and tell this little story. It is an old story, one the author William Faulkner¹ articulated in the 1930s. It is about a 14-year-old girl, Rosa Coldfield, who one day has a glimpse of the idea she had only been told by parents, teachers, and community. Spying through the wisteria vines of a nearby plantation, she observes a lovely scene: a young couple seems to be embracing each other. The idea, romantic and chivalric, is something she vows to serenade and cultivate.

A few years go by, and Coldfield is a young woman now. The smoke settles, the cannons cease to blast, and the last soldier hangs up his uniform and puts away his bayonet. But Coldfield hears the echo of a shot from the plantation laced with wisteria. She tells us how she ran, running full tilt to the house and up the flight of stairs where is comes to a halt before a figure, a coffee-colored Sutpen - but not him, not the slaveholder and owner of the plantation, not Col. Thomas Sutpen but her - *a daughter!*

Instinctively Coldfield knows what lies beyond the door behind this "daughter." In the room lies the murdered "son," and it will be the same room, years later, in which the idea itself lies, a murderer, returned to yellow and decay, no longer chivalric or heroic.

All will be lost if she enters this door now where the murdered lies, but she can remember. She, of a privileged race and class and as poet laureate, can remember the idea as she perceived it, as innocence, as the location in which occupants such as her see themselves as *free*.

Coldfield runs back down the stairs, vowing now to contain the contamination. The idea remains, fortified, institutionalized, charged with eradicating any form of resistance.

I suspect this little story has relevance today. It re-creates the tragedy of American culture: the door no one wants to enter, the idea that seems to be decaying at every turn only to be revived again and again, even if the origin of the idea was shaky, except that it was imaginative - but nonetheless based on ignorance of reality.

This little tale itself is hidden, as they say, in plain sight at most public and private libraries and educational institutions, among countless other stories, similar in kind. The book in which this narrative is contained is itself, metaphorically, a door few enter. This is the catastrophe we face not just when we try to tackle the problem of education but any social problem, health care, housing, poverty. Here is a battleground we in this nation run from only to invent (as a humanitarian effort, of course) stories about freedom and democracy that are not substantiated by reality.

To challenge these stories with their ideas is to subject oneself to the cannons and bayonets of those in the 1% and 99%, regardless of gender or political affiliation.

Students need books, starting on the first day of classes. Music, art, and language skills should never have been reduced or eliminated from the curriculum, and teaching staffs should be diversified. Learning is not constant testing, and teachers should not be evaluated based on test scores. The pressure from administration is more than "bullying" (see "Chicago Teachers Union Ends Strike," www.fightbacknews.org/2012/18). It is a form of torture meant to extract from the mind any thought of resistance: You live or die! Your choice! Do as we tell you!

A raise in salary for teachers is also a plus considering compensation for most other professional employment allows a good chunk of its workers to remain above the poverty line. Most important, a teacher's work is never over after the bell rings or the hours in a building are over. Teachers are students, learners, too. To some extent, it is a way of being: teaching/learning, learning/teaching.

While there may be cause for celebrating the unity of union members, I see questions regarding the books, testing, diversity of teachers, even the raises. What books? Who will decide? What is the

perspective of those in power to decide not only the books but the content of what is to be learned?

In Arizona and in other locations throughout the U.S., certain books and certain subjects, particularly certain painful subjects some would like to leave behind that door, have been removed from the classroom. What remains is another story with a set of ideas more in keeping with the agenda of the bourgeoisie and capitalist classes - fearful of resistance to the status quo.

Let me point out something else that older people fail to remember and younger people have never been taught to understand. I will use a passage from Sheldon S. Wolin's *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*.

The significance of the African American prison population is political. What is notable about the African American population generally is that it is highly sophisticated politically and by far the one group that throughout the twentieth century kept alive a spirit of resistance and rebelliousness. In that contest, criminal justice is as much a strategy of political neutralization as it is a channel of instinctive racism.

Interesting word - that "neutralization"...

Wolin argues that under what he calls "inverted totalitarianism," the kind the culture here in the U.S. seems to be adopting as opposed to "classical," that is, Stalin's Soviet Union or Hitler's Germany, "economics dominates politics - and with that domination come different forms of ruthlessness...such as "withholding appropriated money" or "waiving minimum wage standards." State power is not reduced but actually increases thanks to these kinds of strategies that "play a major role in the incorporation of state and corporate power."

We do not want to talk about the political mascots (Democrats and Republicans) who do the bidding of the corporate power and that *surprising* (for those least affected) number of Black Americans in the last 30 years filling up the prisons as fast as the politicians and corporate powers can materialize them. We do not want to talk about that neutralizing process whereby Black children seem to jump from elementary school or high school straight to prison. This movement of the Black population is profitable for the corporations as well as for

certain workers invested with maintaining "law and order." Other citizens agree: "criminals are them!"

That is the narrative of the neutralizing process! Ideas that differ with absolute innocence are silenced. Freedom and democracy be damned - and we know it, but we cannot help ourselves! Ignorance is bliss and only "criminals" and "evil doers" - the demonic for Rosa Coldfield, want to take our freedom to be innocent away from us!

Ruthless - you bet! You live or die! Your choice! Our brand of totalitarianism - or elimination!

Ultimately no one wins, except maybe the 1%, temporarily, if we do not enter that door - and more than once!

The kind of education our children receive - all children - matters. It is not so much a matter of "quality" - interpreted under a certain mindset to mean, for example, an intensive study of privileged via race of authors in literature or scientists to the exclusion of others. Nor do I mean the other extreme where teachers sprinkle in the curriculum cultural "difference" as if, for example, a history of enslavement and genocide and their legacy is specifically Black or Indigenous history and worthy of some attention by all other students. The condescending approach is registered by Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow children as just that - condescending - and leaves white children to believe in a hierarchy of ideas and knowledge. (Some white liberals who came of age as civil rights activists, anti-war activists, feminists, environmentalists etc are as terrified of those Blacks who came of age in the "Black Power" movement as the corporate powers. They may still admire and speak well of Malcolm X or Huey Newton, but are suspicious of Blacks who came through the movement and still maintain an affinity to resist the injustice of our corporate State).

And more of the same with "more books," "less testing," smaller classroom, etc - is not the answer, does not make for revolutionary change either, if the neutralizing process is left in tact and its origins in fear and ignorance is not confronted. It just may take a little longer for Black children to reach their prison cells, if they are not shot dead by another child who has had enough or a police officer charged with maintaining law and order in urban areas.

Imagine you are a young Latino in a classroom in the U.S. and the lesson you hear claims not only that Columbus discovered the

Americas, but also that the U.S. geographic layout was the same as it was before 1846 - *before* the conquest of Mexico, that is, California, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. It was unoccupied land, of course, free for the taking.ⁱⁱ

When you have an "esteemed" professor give a lecture on the *first* civilization, the Greek civilization, dismissing dynasties of African civilization, you have a problem. Worse when graduate students are taught not to challenge authority or even to request clarification, then you have the practice of indoctrination of ignorance, that is, absolute innocence, repression - not education.

It is much harder and riskier to work to abolish a set of ideas that have been sanctioned by power than it is to win a labor victory. *Down the road, things will change.* But do we have time?

In "higher education," everyone wants more of the same - "to get ahead." What does it mean "to get ahead"? Get ahead of what?

The neutralization process is being tweaked to include everyone - who wants to get ahead!

Professor William Deresiewicz, in his article, "Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education" (*The Nation*, May 4, 2011), writes that he fails to understand why "debate right now about primary and secondary education" is not extended to include "a public debate about higher education." His article draws attention to the horrors unfolding at colleges and universities, surrounding this thing called "education":

What we have in academia...is a microcosm of the American economy as a whole: a self-enriching aristocracy, a swelling and increasingly immiserated proletariat, and a shrinking middle class. The same devil's bargain stabilizes the system: the middle, or at least the upper middle, the tenured professoriate, is allowed to retain its prerogatives - its comfortable compensation packages, its workplace autonomy and its job security - in return for acquiescing to the exploitation of the bottom by the top, and indirectly, the betrayal of the future of the entire enterprise.

It has been my observation that the idealization of inequality, that is not just class based but most importantly race based, orders labor at four-year institutions to further serve the corporations: the laborers

themselves manage the exploitation and work to maintain a purified idea of "democracy" in which everyone accepts the conditions associated with their enslavement. In this sense, labor's capitulation to the market enterprise is partly to blame for the ordering of educational workers and the ordering and ultimate elimination of difference. While those at the bottom worry about survival and remain silent, those at the top of this order look away - but never down.

Returning to Deresiewicz, he points to the presence of "academic managers" at college and university campuses along with storytellersⁱⁱⁱ (those Coldfields get around) who create the "literature of reform." What are they selling? "Online courses, distance learning, do-it-yourself instruction: this is the future we're offered."

Who do these narrators of a "vision of the future," these managers and storytellers serve if not their corporate bosses? Are they not "managing" the preservation of the "American Way," racking up the profits while institutionalizing an immediate means of killing resistance?

Deresiewicz, too, asks questions we all should ask when it comes to this future we are being offered by the corporate world:

Why teach a required art history course to twenty students at a time when you can march them through a self-guided online textbook followed by a multiple-choice exam? Why have professors or even graduate students grade papers when you can outsource them to BAs around the country, even the world? Why waste time with office hours when students can interact with their professors via e-mail?

Students in higher education have become "clients." I heard this term used in the last 10 years. Clients! These "clients" come to the college classroom already as trained as consumers, and, as Deresiewicz writes, they are running the show, "scouring the market like savvy" consumers. The universities' response, of course, is to offer courses that would compete for the "newly empowered 18-year-olds'" attention and money.

It is the "invisible hand," writes Deresiewicz, raining down its blessings on "education" - throughout the country from K-12 and higher." Here is another question that draws the link between primary and secondary education and higher education: "Do we really want

our higher education system redesigned by the self-identified needs of high school seniors?"

Unfortunately, the corporate-capitalists have done an efficient job of educating our society in every walk of life to accepting its idea of life. In other words - expendables fill cells beneath the panoptic towers and eligible clones from the elementary and high schools already see bright, as in white, futures at the ivory towers. The tragedy at the center of American culture remains. Neutralization is normalized. Survival of the fittest! Politicians have come to understand this but so have parents. As Deresiewicz writes, parents and students been taught to move toward "the 'practical,' narrowly conceived: the instrumental, the utilitarian, the immediately negotiable."

Well, there should not be any surprise here. This is what confronts us 24/7. Corporate media tells us that *everyone* wants to land in the 1%. You could deal drugs, dribble a basketball, rap about bitches and whores, or model the corporate idea of beauty or you can go to college where the mission of education today (read the ads along the side of the buses or right there at your computer!) is perceived by students and parents as a means to achieve financial security - not as a means to become thinking and questioning human beings who are capable of creating and developing ideas for the benefit of the 99%.

Who needs alternative thinking when the corporation has the future for everyone all mapped out? *Come join us. Everyone else has!*

Political science, philosophy, history and anthropology, for example, writes Deresiewicz, "are not areas of state importance." Consequently, politicians including Barack Obama, he continues, stress the need to improve math and science proficiency.

Citing Jonathan Cole's argument in *The Great American University* (2009), Deresiewicz writes that the U.S. is becoming indistinguishable from China, "where they don't want people to think about other ways to arrange society or other meanings than the authorized ones."

"A scientific education creates technologists. A liberal arts education creates citizens: people who can think broadly and critically about themselves and the world."

So it is no wonder that in the U.S. humanities departments are shrinking, if they are not just shut down. In 2010, writes Deresiewicz, the State University of New York at Albany "announced plans to close

its departments of French, Italian, Russian, classics and theatre - a wholesale slaughter of the humanities." *Ruthless! You bet. This kind of "education" is serious business!*

And so is resistance - hence the ruthlessness!

A labor victory in Chicago? Okay! Celebrate! The politicians and their corporate masters calculate. Incorporate! Manage this "democracy"!

Totalitarianism narrated by the U.S. Empire.

Deresiewicz calls for tenured faculty, who "enjoy the strongest speech protections in society," to stand up.

Do not hold your breath. You will get reform if they move an inch! This class has no vested interest in the 99%. It does not matter who comes into the classroom or what narrative they are asked to spin - as long as the pay is good and it keeps rolling in!

The contamination has not been from some imaginary bogey-man figure. In the U.S., the citizenry has been steered away from confronting that door before them until they no longer are able to distinguish between the living and the dying. This has been the work of those in power at the top in conjunction with neighbors, teachers, children and parents. Everyone. It will take hard work to untangle ourselves from the Empire's web of innocence.

If teachers' unions want to be daring (revolutionary) and really challenge the totalitarian future we are being offered, they must educate the community of students, parents, and concerned citizenry to reject their identification with and enslavement to the corporate idea of freedom and democracy!

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Absalom! Absalom! (1939).

See Juan Gonzales' *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*.

For example: James Garland, *Saving Alma Mater* (2009), Robert Zemsky, *Making Reform Work*, (2009). Deresiewicz: "When Garland enumerates the fields a state legislature might want to encourage its

young people to enter, he lists `engineering, agriculture, nursing, math and science education, or any other area of state importance.”



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ⁱ *Absalom! Absalom!* (1939).

ⁱⁱ See Juan Gonzales' *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*.

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