

# Internationalizing Educational Resistance: On Identifying a Common Enemy from Standardized Testing to the War on Libya

Derek R. Ford | Education | Analysis | January 27th, 2015



Art by Tago Hoisei.

On April 15, 1986, under the orders of U.S. president Ronald Reagan 66 U.S. warplanes began a deadly bombing campaign against the independent and sovereign state of Libya, killing at least 100 civilians, including Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's adopted daughter, Hana. It was the second attack against the nation in as many months: on March 24, U.S. warships and aircraft carriers entered Libyan air and water territories and attacked Libyan patrol boats and ground targets. Both acts of war were unprovoked and, particularly in the second set of strikes (which intended to assassinate the leader of a sovereign head of state), in complete violation of international law. Reagan, of course, attempted to portray at least the April 15 bombing campaign as "retaliatory," although it was soon revealed that the entire campaign had been set in motion nine months earlier. At that time, in July of 1985, Robert MacFarland, Reagan's National Security Advisor, drew up plans for an attack and in October of that year the U.S. military ran an attack simulation. This hostile orientation toward Libya continued for decades, and culminated in a full-scale war in 2011.

Three years before the 1986 bombing campaign, in April of 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published by Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report embedded the goals and purposes of education within a nationalist framework of economic and technological productivity, called for "rigorous" standards and accountability mechanisms and technologies, and placed teachers in the crosshairs of reform efforts, among other things. The report itself flowed from previous stabs at educational "reform by commission" (Ravitch, 2003). Yet it is the 1983 report that in many ways inaugurated the winding path of neoliberal education reform that is currently treading us today, coming as it did just after the 1978-1980 neoliberal turn.

Although separated in time and space, it is absolutely crucial to understand these two events—the attack on Libya and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*—as part of the same global neoliberal agenda, which is to say that both of these assaults shared the same broad underlying logic and overarching goals. Indeed, they both were produced by—and productive of—a protracted war in which we are still engrossed. The reason why such an understanding is necessary is quite simple: There is currently a burgeoning and promising movement against educational privatizations in the U.S. Across the country students, teachers, parents, and workers are waging often militant struggles against standardized testing, accountability regimes, attacks on teachers unions, school closures, scripted curricula, the Common Core, and so on.

Yet these movements have tended to be constrained to either the local or—at their most expansive—national level. They have not, in other words, been articulated within an international context. This is a problem for a few reasons. First, one of the primary historic drags on social and resistance movements in the U.S. has been national chauvinism. One of the primary domestic ideological affects of U.S. imperialism has thus been a silencing of popular movements, which are halted or dispersed, as they are absorbed into nationalist rhetoric. Consider, for example, the way in which the near-revolutionary anti- or alter-globalization movement virtually vanished after the 9/11 attacks, when George W. Bush's approval rating skyrocketed to 92 percent. Second, without examining the relationship between the current educational "reform" movement in the U.S. and broader structures of imperialism we miss important opportunities to link resistances and establish alliances.

*The thread running through both of these reasons is an appropriate identification of the enemy. And, since the figure of the enemy is absolutely fundamental to any sort of politics, a correct politics requires a correct conception of the enemy.*

### The internal accumulation of capital

The central drive behind the current round of U.S. educational reforms is the logic of the market: educational processes and institutions run more effectively if they are subject to the free market, and this, in turn, will advance the national free market, as schools churn out a workforce tailored to the demands of capital.

As an example, consider Race to the Top (RTT), introduced by and passed under the Obama administration as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. RTT is a cash-prize contest that rewards states for falling into line with neoliberal education policies. Carr and Porfilio (2011) delineate several aspects of RTT that help facilitate the privatization of education, or the transfer of capital away from the public and into the hands of corporations and other private interests.

First, the program expedites the expansion of charter schools by encouraging states to remove or raise caps on the percentage of charter schools that can operate in the state. Carr and Porfilio note, "New York State passed a law specifically to increase the amount of charter schools in the state, which gave them a better chance to net federal dollars" (p. 11). Charter schools, of course, allow corporations and wealthy individuals to capture federal and state moneys destined for education through operating the school and exploiting the labor-power of non-unionized and precarious teachers and staff. This is particularly true of "for-profit" charter schools, although "non-profit" charter schools also run on similar logic. In addition to charter schools, there are also voucher programs. Under a voucher system, the government provides a voucher to family that can be spent at a private educational institution. Additionally, there are performance-contractors, groups that contract with school districts to run or otherwise manage schools within the district for a definite period of time.

Kenneth Sallman (2010) provides a list of some of the forms that educational privatizations take: "performance-contracting," for-profit charter schools, school vouchers, school commercialism, for-profit online education, online homeschooling, test publishing and textbook industries, electronic and computer-based software curriculum, for-profit remediation, educational contracting for food, transportation, and financial services" (p. 17). Carr and Porfilio (2011) emphasize the profits to be made through the production and purchase of "standardized curricula, textbooks, and test preparation materials" (p. 12). Through commercialism in schools, children are placed in the crosshairs of corporate marketing campaigns, as advertisements for candy and toys appear in tests and textbooks, and corporations "partner" with school districts.

Pedagogically speaking, however, RTT also allows for the production of particular types of workers, notably those that will fill precarious and flexible positions in the service-sector of the economy. Because charter schools are publicly funded but privately owned and run, they represent a guaranteed market for business interests, both in terms of their ability to realize values and their ability to produce a suitable workforce. Part and parcel of this latter effect of privatization is an attack on critical pedagogy, or critical thinking skills more broadly. Standardization, testing, and accountability grants corporations and private interests "the power to subvert teachers' ability to implement pedagogies that guide students to reflect critically about self and Other, knowledge and power, and the role they and their students can play to eliminate oppression in schools and their communities" (p. 12).

### The external accumulation of capital

Educational reforms are about the private expropriation of public goods, services, and social relations. Moreover, they are about attacking one of the most entrenched public rights, and in this respect they provide a crucial ideological tool for neoliberalism more generally. Yet this must be seen as a process of the *internal* or *domestic* accumulation of capitals. And here is the link between educational reforms and the U.S. war against Libya: this war—which entailed the reconquering of a former colony and the privatization of a highly nationalized economy—was about the *external* accumulation of capitals.

Libya suffered under colonial rule until it achieved "formal independence" in 1949. This is most often attributed to an act passed by the United Nations, but it was also no doubt attributable to sustained resistance by the Libyan people. In 1951, a monarchy was established and power was granted (by the United Nations, not the Libyans) to King Idris. Britain stepped in as the neo-colonial overseer, and it as well as the United States established and maintained military and air bases in the country. "For Gaddafi and his fellow officers who led the overthrow of King Idris, the monarch had sold out Libya to foreign, imperial powers" (Forte, 2012, p. 37). Thus, when Gaddafi led a 1969 coup that ousted the colonial powers and inaugurated a period of national liberation, one of the first acts of the new government was to close all foreign military bases, including the U.S. Wheelus Air Force Base on the outskirts of Tripoli.

Although the new Jamahiriya government was not socialist, it existed in antagonism with imperialism and, later, neoliberalism. The government would be defined best as "national-bourgeois," a somewhat contradictory social formation that is progressive in that it defends the formerly colonized country against imperialism and possesses nationalized social systems, but regressive in that it protects a system of class rule. Indeed, Libya under the Jamahiriya government was characterized by a high standard of living [1] As Brian Becker (2011, Aug. 22) notes,

*Because of Libya's economic policies, living standards for the population had jumped dramatically after 1969. Having a small population and substantial income from its oil production, augmented with the Gaddafi regime's far-reaching policy of social benefits, created a huge advance in the social and economic status for the population. Libya was still a class society with rich and poor, and gaps between urban and rural living standards, but illiteracy was basically wiped out, while education and health care were free and extensively accessible. By 2010, the per capita income in Libya was near the highest in Africa at \$14,000 and life expectancy rose to over 77 years, according to the CIA's World Fact Book.*

These radical improvements that came as a result of social spending, including free tuition through higher education, were made possible because the state exerted tight control over oil production, and hence did not allow unrestricted foreign access, which was more than irksome to Libya's foreign colonizers. Additionally, the financial, military, and symbolic support that Libya gave to national liberation struggles across the globe was particularly threatening to imperialism and the burgeoning neoliberal order. The Jamahiriya government helped the South African fight against apartheid, the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli settler-colonial state, and the Irish Republican Army struggle against British colonialism, just to name a few. This support was instrumental to many resistance movements.

While the Libyan government was forced to make concessions to global capital after the fall of the Soviet Union and the wave of counterrevolution that began in 1989–1991, Libya under the Gaddafi government was never a neoliberal state; goods and services like housing, education, and healthcare were non-privatized and considered free and public. Additionally, there are signs that the neoliberal policies adopted by the Gaddafi government in the 1990s were being tamed back. For example, one cable from the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli to the U.S. State Department in 2007 warned, "There has been growing evidence of Libyan resource nationalism. The regime has made a point of putting companies on notice that 'exploitative' behavior will not be tolerated" (U.S. Department of State, 2007/11/15). The public services and institutions that were built from nationalization policies became direct targets in the war against Libya, including schools. During the second month of the bombing campaign, for example, a NATO missile took aim at and destroyed the Libyan Down's Syndrome Society, an elementary school that helped transition young students with Down's Syndrome into the general public school system (Noueihed, 2011, Apr. 30).

### Conclusion

We are enduring through a period of intense reaction. We might even call it counterrevolutionary. To be sure, there are promising sparks of uprisings routinely occurring, flickers of protest and social movements, and sustained flames of resistance across the globe. In some parts of the world, resistance movements even hold dominant political, military, social, and economic power. But compared to the circuit of social and national liberation struggles that swept the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear that international capital is winning. The neoliberal agenda could even still be in an infantile stage.

As we study and fight against neoliberal rule in the U.S. educational arena and elsewhere domestically, we must look abroad for allies and supporters. We must also recognize and address our relatively privileged position in an oppressing, imperialist, and settler-colonial nation (with all of the contradictions involved for the various sectors of the working-class). Thinking through how current war on public education in the U.S. and the war on Libya are embedded within the same neoliberal logic of capital accumulation and production can address both of these pressing, practical needs. This step also entails surveying the world scene and drawing lines of demarcation. In so doing, we might be surprised who and what forces we find on our side. This does not mean that we have to be in complete political agreement. Indeed, as Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur (2001) note, "Revolutionary movements can succeed on a global basis only when differences over ideological interests and political goals can be put aside" (p. 147).

Despite facing a concerted military attack by a consortium of the most well-funded and deadly militaries, which continuously bombed Libyan cities and villages for a nine-month period, the Libyan people resisted heroically. This included both armed resistance and organized protest movements. For example, in July of 2011, as the bombing campaign was intensifying, 2 million Libyans—about one-third of the entire population—hit the streets of Tripoli in a protest against the bombing [2] The line between "civilian" and "military" became increasingly blurred and, as the war progressed, obliterated. In March, as the rebels first tried to advance to the central coastal city of Sirte, they were repelled not by government forces but by armed civilians, primarily those belonging to the Warfalla tribe. In July, as NATO bombing intensified, the government distributed 1.2 million weapons to civilian volunteers, many of them women (Londono, 2011, Jul. 1) [3] Unfortunately, in the U.S. there was a relative absence of an anti-war protest movement, especially when viewed in light of the massive movement against the war in Iraq. [4] Even worse, many activists, left organizations, and alternative media outlets actually supported the NATO-backed rebels, in deed if not also in word (see Becker and Majidi, 2013 for a sharp polemic about this).

It could be argued that the movement against the neoliberal rule in U.S. schools should focus its energy and momentum on one issue only. Once we locate this trend as an internal manifestation of a global system, recognizing the tight connection between neoliberalism and imperialism, however, then the stakes of the struggle change. More accurately, the stakes of the struggle and the battle lines that define that struggle—and the enemy—become sharper. The neoliberal war on U.S. public education becomes one facet in a broader neoliberal war against the public everywhere. This is particularly important for movements operating in the U.S., given the debilitating impact of patriotism and national chauvinism, which often channel popular struggles into nationalist campaigns for global domination. For any social movement-led alone revolutionary movement to succeed in the U.S., this legacy has to be countered, and this can only be done through an unapologetic and firm anti-imperialist stance.

**Acknowledgments** - This article is an amended version of a book chapter, "From standardized testing to the war on Libya: The privatization of U.S. education in international context," in Brad Porfilio & Mark Abendroth's forthcoming edited volume, *School against the neoliberal rule: Understanding neoliberal rule in PK-12 schools*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.

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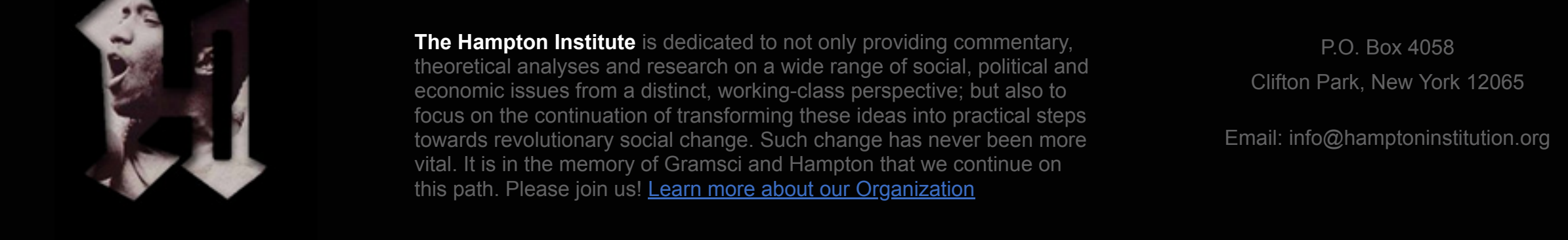
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[1] For example, life expectancy increased by 20 years between 1980 and 2000. See <http://www.earthtrends.wri.org/> for more information.

[2] Video footage of the protest can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2Nk3zv4U>.

[3] The fact that the Libyan government felt confident distributing over 1 million arms to volunteers speaks to the popular support that they enjoyed in the fight against the international neoliberal order.

[4] The primary, and perhaps only, exception to this was a united front formed by the Nation of Islam and the ANSWER Coalition (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), which organized nation-wide protests and a nation-wide speaking tour featuring Cynthia McKinney, who led an international delegation to Libya in May-June, 2011.



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