

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**The Paradoxical Complexity of an Analysis of Trilateralism in America Today***by David Model*

The dichotomy between the growing enlightenment of the American people on matters of public policy and the deepening entrenchment of corporate power in civil, political and economic institutions renders any optimism about the uprooting of corporate rule problematic. One of the gateways to the nexus of power in Washington has been the Trilateral Commission, an organization whose primary purpose has been to appropriate the pervasive powers of executive and legislative institutions for captains of industry. While many of the Trilateralists' objectives have been partially or completely realized, at the same time the public is becoming increasingly aware that their government is not serving their interest. For example, the financial bailout, critically flawed healthcare reform, cap and trade and wars to protect the security of Americans have been rejected by the public at various times as viable solutions to the crises facing Americans.

Corporate power has been established through campaign donations, lobbying and the revolving door between government officials, regulators and members of the corporate or lobbying community. Health, pharmaceutical, energy, financial, manufacturing and technological industries to name but a few have tentacles firmly gripping powerful members of the government including the president, high-ranking members of the bureaucracy, chairs of committees and subcommittees, Speaker of the House and Majority leaders and executive and legislative advisors.

For example, the collapse of the financial markets can be traced to efforts by Wall Street to eliminate regulations that interfere in their freedom to act exclusively according to their objectives. They have succeeded by creating a revolving door between government, regulatory agencies and financial institutions and by intense lobbying efforts. Relaxing a critical prohibition about how commercial banks can invest their money was the result of 20 years of lobbying and hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign contributions leading to the replacement in 2000 of the Glass-Steagall Act with the Financial Services Modernization Act. This act opened the door to highly speculative investments with peoples' savings.

Another fear on Wall Street was the creation of an exchange for complex, highly leveraged and speculative investment instruments such as derivatives. Again Wall Street prevailed by persuading the government to pass the Commodity Futures Modernization Act in 2000 which allowed trading in derivatives without any meaningful regulations.

Wall Street's power is entrenched through campaign contributions targeting key members of the government such as

Senator Charles Schumer, member of both the Senate Committee on Finance and the Senate committee on Banking, Housing and Urban affairs, who has received in excess of \$14 million from Wall Street and \$1,753,900 in 2009 alone. Senator Harry Reid, majority leader, received over \$1 million and Financial Services Committee Chair in the House, Rep. Barney Frank received \$382,349 to name but a few.

In addition, high level members of Obama's administration were recruited from too-big-too-fail Wall Street firms. Examples include Neal Wollin, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury and second in command under Geithner and former Chairman of Hartford Financial Services Group Inc., Gene Sperling, currently counselor to the Treasury Department, former advisor to Goldman Sachs while Larry Summers, Obama's chief economic advisor was formerly managing director of a hedge fund. Geithner himself, Secretary of the Treasury was formerly President of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Other members of Wall Street now occupy positions in the Security Exchange's Commission and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

Also, crafting health care legislation was robustly influenced by the same nexus of corporate influence peddlers who were successful into reducing the open option to an illusory counterfeit public system.

An example of donations from the health industry to key members of Congress include \$546,000 to John McCain, \$425,000 to Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell, and \$413,000 to Senator Baucus.

The revolving door between government, lobbyists and the health care industry greatly enhanced the capability of lobbyists and their clients to influence health care reform. Health care corporations hired approximately 166 former staffers and 13 former members of the nine congressional leadership offices and five committees who contributed to the shaping of health care legislation. As well, 112 former staffers lobbied members of Congress on health care legislation. Fourteen former aides to House Majority leader Steny Hoyer and thirteen former aides to Senator Max Baucus, Chairman of the finance Committees joined lobbying firms to lobby Congress on health care legislation. (A Study for the Centre for Responsive Politics, Northwestern University)

Ascendance of corporate influence in policy-making can be at least partly attributable to the influence of the Trilateral Commission. The doctrine of Trilateralism refers to the blueprint for American, European and Japanese democracies as contrived by the Trilateral Commission, founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Its elite membership consists of leaders from business, government, academia, media and conservative labor leaders who intended to create "A worldwide economic power superior to the political governments of the nation-states involved." David Rockefeller affirmed the success of the Commission in 1998 when he claimed that: "We are now in the driver's seat of the global economic engine. We are setting government policies instead of watching from the sidelines."

The methodology by which the Commission intended to achieve its objectives according to Stephen Gill, Associate Professor of Political Science at York University: "was through the necessity for leadership groups in the Trilateral regions to agree on basic concepts, mobilize collective resources under agreed criteria, counter threats and achieve their normative commitments." (*American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission*, p.198)

Populist movements in the 1960s fomented the creation of the Trilateral Commission as elite groups feared the growing power of the masses who were participating in the anti-war, feminist, civil rights and solidarity movements. According to the Commission: "The demands on democratic government grow, while the capacity of government stagnates. This, it would appear, is the central dilemma of the governability of democracy...In an age of widespread secondary school and university education, the pervasiveness of the mass media, and the displacement of manual labor by clerical and professional employees, this development (the challenging of authority) constitutes a challenge to democratic government."

In response to this perceived threat to their influence on government policies, the Commission produced a major report titled *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. The solution to the crisis of democracy is: "The effective operation of democratic political system [which] usually requires some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups." Noam Chomsky succinctly states that in order for the Commission to achieve its objectives: "The general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and driven from the arena of political debate and action, if democracy is to survive." (*Necessary Illusions*, p. 3) In her book *Trilateralism*, Holly Sklar describes the purpose of the Trilateralists: "What must follow [democratic surge], as the Trilateralists see it, is the reassertion of elite rule and decades of public apathy." (*Trilateralism*, p. 36)

To suppress the democratic impulse of the masses who were protesting for social justice and peace, the Trilateralists concluded that the public's primary sources of enlightenment must implant in the public consciousness a predilection for conformity, obedience and apathy. These major sources included education, value-oriented intellectuals and the mass media. An ignorant, passive, distracted and apathetic citizenry would not interfere with the Commission's agenda to expand the power of corporations.

The media is considered part of the problem of an excess of democracy because, according to *The Crisis of Democracy* report: "The most notable new source of national power in 1970...was the national media...There is, for instance, considerable evidence to suggest that the development of television journalism contributed to the undermining of government authority." (*Crisis in Democracy*, p. 98)

Education also posed a threat since "The more educated a person is, the more likely he is to participate in politics...Consequently, a democratic surge could be simply the reflection of a more highly educated populace." (*Crisis in Democracy*, p. 110) Trilateralists

believed that education should serve the ruling class and recommended that students other than elite white male students be steered away from college and concentrate on vocational training.

Intellectuals who express dissenting points of views, particularly those who challenge prevailing values and authorities contaminate the public with subversive ideas thereby undermining the power of elite groups. As stated in *Crisis in Democracy*: "At the present time, a significant challenge comes from the intellectuals and related groups who assert their disgust with the corruption of materialism, and inefficiency of democracy and with the subservience of democratic government to 'monopoly capitalism'. The development of an 'adversary culture' among intellectuals has affected students, scholars, and the media...who often devote themselves to the derogation of leadership, the challenging of authority and the unmasking and delegitimation of established institutions." (*Crisis in Democracy*, p. 7)

Evaluating the degree to which the Commission has succeeded in its objectives requires an examination of their impact on education, mass media, marginalizing intellectuals and creating distractions in order to induce apathy.

Privatizing schools is becoming a vehicle for inculcating the proper values and knowledge in students to avoid another "crisis in democracy". Schools in America today are littered with a profusion of advertising and marketing gimmicks to develop a functional mindset in which the prevailing value is commercialism.

Charter schools and universal voucher systems are about privatizing public schools, breaking the power of teacher unions, freeing schools from the burden of State regulations and transferring the ownership of schools to private interests.

Charter schools are created by a charter which authorizes entities such as the State Board of Education or local school districts with the power to grant charters to applicants who may include local school districts, non-profit corporations or for-profit corporations. They are funded by public money and freed from some of the burdensome State Educational regulations but are still accountable to the State for student results. As of March 2009, a total of 5,250 charter schools have opened.

For example, Renaissance 2010 was created in 2004 by Mayor Daley in Chicago for the purpose of building a network of charter schools to play "a predominant role in maintaining and assuring a healthy urban middle-class...Renaissance 2010 places public schooling under the control of corporate leaders who aim to convert public schools to charter and contract schools, breaking the power of unions and handing over the administration of the newly created charter schools to 'providers' beholden to corporations." (Danny Weil, *Neoliberalism, Charter Schools and the Chicago Model*, Counterpunch, Aug. 24, 2009)

President Obama's choice of Arne Duncan as Education Secretary, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and a technocrat in

the formation of Renaissance 2010, reflects his strong support for charter schools. As well, Obama is in favor of correlating teachers' pay with performance. (ibid)

Performance in charter schools has not resulted in an improvement in academic achievement according to a study conducted by the National Centre for Educational Statistics which found that students in charter schools performed several points worse than students in traditional schools in both reading and math on the National assessment of Education Progress test. (National Centre for Education Statistics, *A Closer Look at Charter Schools*, 2006) Due to the variations in study results measuring the performance of students in charter schools and the dangers inherent in privatization, it is clear that charter schools are not in the public interest.

Another method for privatizing schools is the voucher system in which the government issues vouchers to parents whose children can then use the vouchers to buy a place in the school of their choice and the taxes normally paid by parents who send their children to private schools are waived. According to the National Education Association, voucher systems would erode educational standards, reduce funding for public education and breed discrimination. (National Education Association, *Vouchers*, 2010)

Exposing students to a constant barrage of advertising in the halls, cafeteria, sports facilities and in the classroom reinforces the core value of commercialism to ensure their commitment to the American free market virtual monopolistic system and also to serve as a distraction from the problems caused by this system.

Advertising is being used as a tool to frame the socialization of students in the context of commercialism. A report produced by the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at the University of Colorado claims that: "In 2008-2009 companies continued to aggressively market to the captive audience of children and youth attending schools...The 2007...report on schoolhouse commercialism noted for the first time the effort of marketers to create a 'total environment' by blurring the boundaries between editorial content and advertising and thus thoroughly infusing childhood with marketing messages."

Channel One is a very insidious strategy for indoctrinating students with the proper values by forcing them to watch ten minutes of ostensible news and two minutes of pernicious advertising every school day. Eight million students in 12,000 schools are exposed to ten minutes of news but only two minutes is actually devoted to political, economic or social issues followed by two minutes of commercials for cosmetics, video games, athletic shoes, soft drinks, candies and television shows. In the Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics warns that: "School is not the place to get pressured to develop life-long brand preferences and to be advertised on how to spend disposable income." (Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics, *Commercialism in Classrooms*, April 4, 2001, p. e44)

Following their education, graduates must not be exposed to ideas and information that would induce skepticism or cynicism of the

zeitgeist shaped by the ruling class. Once they complete their education, the mainstream media becomes a major source of information about domestic and global issues and therefore, must be reined in to ensure that the public is exposed to what Noam Chomsky refers to as "necessary illusions". "In short", according to Noam Chomsky: "the major media...are corporations 'selling' privileged audiences to other businesses. It would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product." (Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought control in democratic societies*, p. 8)

Growing concentration of the media has facilitated the propagation of the "perspectives and interests" of the owners who are members of the ruling class and the Trilateral Commission. The rules of the FCC have been relaxed since 1993 but debates over such questions as Comcast's proposed takeover of NBC Universal miss the point entirely. Large corporate owners already dominate the marketplace of information as reflected by the control exercised by the "big five" consisting of General Electric, Time Warner, The Walt Disney Co., Viacom and News Corporation.

This is not a conspiracy theory but simply an analysis of an attempt by each media conglomerate to serve its own interests. Noam Chomsky, in his ground-breaking work, *Manufacturing Consent*, describes five filters - ownership, advertising, official sources, flak and marginalizing dissent - through which unacceptable information is withheld from the public and acceptable information is entrusted to them.

Dissident intellectuals, another threat to corporate rule, must have minimal public exposure to minimize their impact on the dominant doctrinal system. Since their opinions are expressed primarily in the alternate media which lacks the resources to compete with the mainstream media for a large audience, they are virtually marginalized. Notwithstanding their exposure in the alternate media through the internet, their audience still remains small relative to the mainstream media since most people are not aware of the need for or existence of the alternate media and, in addition, have faith in the mainstream media to provide them with "all the news that is fit to print".

Despite the efforts of the Trilateral Commission as well as corporate, government and university think tanks and foundations, the public is gradually achieving a level of awareness that one day will, in the words of the ruling class, create a "crisis in democracy". A number of polls conducted in recent years reveal a divergence of opinion between corporate-influenced Congress along with the ruling class and public opinion. As well, public participation in the political process through demonstrations, contacting Members of Congress and joining organizations is alive and well.

For example, according to the Pew Research Centre, in October 2009, 66% of Americans believed that: "All Americans [should] have health insurance, with government providing financial help for those unable to afford it. (Pew Research Centre Publications, *October 2009*)

Poll) Just 15% [of Americans] say health care in this country is the 'best in the world,' while 23% rate it as 'above average'; about six-in-ten (59%) view U.S. health care as either 'average' (32%) or 'below average' (27%).” (Pew Research Centre Publications, *July 24 2009 Poll*)

Only 12% of Americans believe that their economy is the best in the world while 64% believe it is average or below average. (Pew Research Centre Publications, *April 28-May 12 Poll*)

Pew Research also reveals that 65% of the public believes that global warming is either a “very serious” or “somewhat serious” threat. (Pew Research Centre, *2009 Poll*)

Notwithstanding the strong efforts of the ruling class to obviate a “crisis in democracy” through the Trilateral Commission and other corporate organizations, their objective of reducing the population to a level of ignorance where democratic demands can be minimized or avoided altogether has not entirely succeeded. On the other hand, a high degree of ostensible apathy and obedience seems to have dampened the spirits of many seeking greater social justice.

Understanding this apparent apathy is a complex task given the number of contributing factors. Economic hardship which deprives people of time and energy, fear engendered by the growing police state and intolerance to any form of dissent, an entertainment culture that distracts people from substantive issues, the impact of the Trilateral Commission and other business organizations and the corporate stranglehold of Congress all seem to affect people’s willingness to participate in progressive movements. Nevertheless, history has demonstrated that injustice will ultimately evoke revolutionary movements because at some point, people have nothing to lose.

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