

# Identifying the Youth-Industrial Complex

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There are malevolent forces driving the democracy deficit that are undermining youth and democracy right now. This phenomenon is the Youth- Industrial Complex, which determines the nature, cause, and effect of relationships between activities of any kind for children and youth on one hand, and on the other hand, businesses, governments, and nonprofits, as well as the functions between public and private sectors. Acknowledging the history and future of the phenomenon, it is essential for this knowledge to become core learning among people within and affected by the complex (Fletcher, 2014a). This includes parents, educators, youth workers, mental health providers, and youth themselves.

As others have identified, there is a nonprofit industrial complex that affects billions of people worldwide, benefiting and detracting from efforts to make change all while avoiding appearing innocuous and indifferent (Samimi, 2010). However, this posturing is ineffectual for any critical examination of the impact of these organizations. A close look at their own impact evaluations as well as the commentary of politicians, activists, and others shows how many local and international nonprofits can have broadly negative outcomes in the short- term and long- term (Helmig et al., 2014). Because of their age and role in society though, young people might be the most heinously affected. Their experience is so finitely affected that it needs to be addressed as the Youth- Industrial Complex.

The Youth-Industrial Complex is a phenomenon that summarizes the overlapping interests of nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies which use public and private resources to create youth- serving activities to address economic, social, and political problems. It is reflected in the relationship between the three components of

governments, nonprofits, and businesses. These activities reinforce each sector's mutually beneficial interactions with young people.

Each individual component gains from addressing specific problems in society with specific activities for youth, while the other two aspects gain from ensuring young people have those specific problems in the first place. This looks like government agencies getting increased budgets for issues affecting youth; nonprofits receive funding and create jobs that address those issues; businesses earn profits by ensuring those issues exist in the first place; government entities regulate those businesses ensuring taxation that supports government agencies. Government agencies get increased budgets, and so forth.

The issues are vast, and include the school- to- prison pipeline, cannabis usage, athletics, suicidal ideation, school vending machines, and much more. The government agencies address all of those issues in several different fields, including juvenile justice, economic development, mental health, community recreation, elementary education, and other areas. The nonprofit organizations are as expansive as the fields involved, focusing on community improvement, unmet human needs including food insecurity, housing, afterschool programs, and educational services. Businesses that profit from all of this include consumer goods and services including security services, technology, clothing, entertainment, and other industries such as weapons manufacturers, construction, physical fitness, and more.

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There is an inherent tension between these relationships. While presenting themselves as “saving children” or “helping youth,” many nonprofit organizations, government programs, and even schools benefit from perpetuating the problems afflicting young people today. They benefit through funding, social capital, and other profits. This section explores how they perpetuate the problems in many ways. In what could be applied globally today, in 1932 George Counts said,

America is the scene of an irreconcilable conflict between two opposing forces. On the one side is the democratic tradition inherited from the past; on the other is a system of economic arrangements which increasingly partakes of the nature of industrial feudalism.

Both of these forces cannot survive: one or the other must give way. Unless the democratic tradition is able to organize and conduct a successful attack on the economic system, its complete destruction is inevitable. (Counts, 1978, p. 41)

The tension throughout the Youth- Industrial Complex is tearing at the very fabric of democracy today by incentivizing the democracy deficit disorder, giving tools for the habituation of anti- democracy, and maintaining the economic situation that entirely disincentivizes the strengthening of democracy throughout society. Every single young person is affected by this complex in countless visible and invisible ways, extending from their home lives to sports, schooling to hanging out, from

technology to clothing, and music to communication. So many aspects of young peoples' lives are touched upon by the entwined, non-linear forces of the Youth-Industrial Complex that it can be hard to identify exactly what it is.

Identity segregation, rather than intersectionality, is key to the Youth-Industrial Complex. Youth are frequently identified by governments, nonprofits, and businesses by way of their age, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, and gender, in addition to geographic location, family status, academic achievement, and more. In business, each identity is addressed as a potential "market segment" with products, advertising, and pricing that are targeted specifically at them. In governments, identities may appear less segmented, but still have programs, activities, policies, and policing targeted at them. The very existence of many youth-serving nonprofits is based on youth identities. This specification reinforces the appearance and realities of youth diversity; ironically, it both supports and challenges the very institutions addressing youth to become more effective.

As already identified, the Youth-Industrial Complex consists of three components which form a unique "iron triangle" (Adams, 1981) with each component a solid factor made of several layers. The components of the iron triangle in the Youth-Industrial Complex are:

*Businesses*, including large corporations and sole entrepreneurs; direct sales and consultants; marketers and social media; curriculum designers, program developers, and assessors; lobbyists and gaming; clothing and counseling; and any other profit-oriented transaction.

*Nonprofits*, including all sorts of formal and informal activities that build, foster, and otherwise change communities at the local, regional, state, national, and

international levels, including social services such as community education, food subsidies, healthcare, job training and supported housing, and adoption.

*Governments*, which are systems that operate to organize local, state, national, and international jurisdictions. The three primary parts of government include the legislature, executive, and judiciary on all levels, and their activities are central to designing, implementing, and regulating policy and regulations which govern economies, policing, education, public utilities, businesses, healthcare, transportation, sanitation, and much more.

The Youth- Industrial Complex can be identified in several subsequent relationships, too, including the education industrial complex, the sports industrial complex, the youth/ police industrial complex, the juvenile justice industrial complex, the video game industrial complex, the music/ movie/ television/ entertainment industrial complex, the voting industry complex, and the child welfare industrial complex.

There can be many other activities of each of the components of the Youth- Industrial Complex. Ignoring the subsequent relationships, refusing to see the interconnectedness of each of them, and denying the negative impacts they can have can be confusing to the people who work within these places; to the people affected most by them, seeing each one individually or as disconnected from the others can be disorienting and ultimately disabling. Unfortunately, this segregation of interests and isolation of approaches is commonplace today, with its proponents arguing that it is necessary. However, that is inaccurate at best; at worst, it reveals the insidious nature of neoliberalism and the disparities inherent throughout the Youth- Industrial Complex by obfuscating their true natures. Henry A. Giroux writes how,



...the popular demonization of the young now justifies responses to youth that were unthinkable 20 years ago, including criminalization and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, and zero tolerance policies that model schools after prisons. School has become a model for a punishing society in which children who violate a rule as minor as a dress code infraction or act out slightly in class can be handcuffed, booked and put in a jail cell. (2008, p. 18)

While Giroux addresses the aspects of the Youth- Industrial Complex that are plainly oppressive, the overarching aspects of this reality are obtuse throughout the lives of children and youth. In addition to its dominance over their democratic potential, the Youth- Industrial Complex functions as the tool of total control and adult dominance over young people, embodying Goffman's concept of the total institution (Davies, 1989). This means it wholly disallows their innate human rights, let alone their specific rights as children and youth. As Deleuze explained about institutions, this relationship "cannot be identified with any one institution or apparatus precisely because it is a type of power, a technology, that traverses every kind of apparatus or institution, linking them, prolonging them, and making them converge and function in a new way" (Deleuze, 1986).

This complex relationship and the intricate and interwoven interactions therein are apparent in almost every youth activity in North America. Connecting these sectors within the iron triangle are three bridges:

1. Youth activities include every type of activity that serves young people in society, from consumerism to volunteerism; youth development to education;

culture building to social media; and so- forth. These can be formal and informal; charitable and profiteering; individual and corporate.

2. Public resources are the money, time, property, facilities, equipment, and supplies of any level of government.

3. Private resources are nearly identical, but come from profit- focused non-governmental places, including sole proprietor businesses, corporations, individual donors, philanthropic foundations, and so on.

Just because nonprofits, businesses, and governments are operating in a relationship does not mean they are sitting in a smoky backroom making deals, either. Instead, they are operating in seen and unseen ways that subsequently affect young people in a variety of ways that are both good and bad.

The relationships between nonprofits, government and businesses include subtle and overt interactions between: laws, rules, policies, and regulations; products, programs, curricula, projects, plans, and activities; evaluations, assessments, analytics, and oversight; training, professional development, certifications, and degrees; books, articles, reports, websites, and blogs; associations, affiliations, partnerships, coalitions, networks, districts, and regions; funds, sales, grants, allocations, set- asides, donations, and foundation programs, as well as; schools, faith communities, stores, factories, parks, jails, and much more. All of this is just part of the depth and breadth of the Youth- Industrial Complex.

Looking closer, it is plain to see that the Youth- Industrial Complex is obvious among nonprofits, including community- based organizations and national nonprofits, as well as local coalitions and international networks; governments,

including K- 12 schools, higher education, and agencies and programs on the federal, state, county, and local levels; and businesses including privately owned companies and transnational conglomerates, foundations, and individual donors. There are other entities, too.

The relationships between these entities are driven by three elements, which are private resources, public resources, and youth- serving activities. These elements are clear in the money given, the money spent, and the money obtained between governments, nonprofits, and businesses. They become obvious when observing the leverage between the lobbying and bureaucracies that control sophisticated measures and contracts, which in turn go to private businesses that shift and transition youth culture and the social climate where it belongs. In the meantime, the same elements are apparent within the entire network of support for parents, opportunities for privileged young people and the oppression of other children and youth. All of these rely on the ecosystem of nonprofits, governments, and businesses in order to exist.

The Youth- Industrial Complex exists to create, facilitate, habituate, perpetuate, and encapsulate the lives of young people throughout society. Whether it is beneficial or detrimental is not the point of this analysis; the point is that it simply exists in myriad forms, driving the lives and outcomes of children, youth, and adults throughout the world today.

The Youth- Industrial Complex is a vehicle of the democracy deficit disorder, effectively and continuously delivering indifference, ineffectuality, and near despair to generations of young people. The death knell of the American democratic experiment was sounded with the advent of American corporate/ consumerist culture and its dominance through economic and cultural globalization (Giroux, 2009, p. 32). The

Youth- Industrial Complex exists to undermine, destabilize, and otherwise dismantle democracy for the sake of economic efficacy for the extremely wealthy.

The Youth- Industrial Complex did not simply pop into existence one day. Instead, it has slowly come to exist over a century of political and economic machinations that made individual families, governments, schools, churches, and other locations that form the social fabric serve private financial interests. Within this entanglement emerged the fields of public health, education, youth development, public safety, parenting and family development, healthcare, and sustainability. Taking advantage of their interdependent natures, private financial interests first used these fields to commodify the notion of “youth.” Then obligating these fields to their funding masters, private financial interests were able to carve out profit margins from the social fabric. This is evident in each field. For instance, before there were youth behavioral rehabilitation camps and other sites of explicit profiteering within the “troubled youth” industry, there were family farms and family- owned businesses where non- conforming students could apprentice, learn trades and work for a living rather than being penalized for their differences.

At the same time, the establishment of manufactured and commercialized culture established the position of “youth” within society, which did not exist in prior centuries. Socializing, policing, education, environmentalism, empowerment, workforce development, culture building, civic governance, neighborhooding, and volunteerism began interacting among themselves, and eventually became wholly entwined with commercial youth culture, which today includes music, clothes, hair styles and language, as well as social media, technological devices, connectivity, and so much more.

All of these functions were originally embedded as democratic in their nature and intended to build the efficacy of democratic citizenship in democratic societies. As that happened, it became essential to heal the wounds young people faced. This included stopping forced child labor, ending youth homelessness, defeating educational ignorance, and demanding social justice for all young people, regardless of their identities and because of their belonging in the world.

In turn, this increased adult intentions and deliberations about the status of youth, including who they are, what they do, where they are at, and why they exist. The Youth- Industrial Complex became essential for determining what the answers to these questions are, how they are enacted, and whether they are successful.

However, what emerged was a crisis of purpose wherein so many activities became anti- democratic by forcing youth, either through legal compulsion, cultural tradition, family pressure or economic machinations, to become involved in them. In turn, succeeding generations of young people have become disengaged and disillusioned in much of society. While this was once seen as happening only to college- age students, it became the providence of high school students, and now has reached into elementary years. Jaded, life- weary children and youth are saturated by adult- devised, adult- implemented, and adult- mandated activities throughout their young lives. This leaves young people at risk of becoming wholly divested in the democratic process while forming deeply disturbing attachments to the habits of consumerism (Giroux, 2009, p. 67), including accepting what is handed to them, accepting authority unquestioningly, and believing the mainstream social, cultural, and economic narratives that dominate society.

Understanding the Youth- Industrial Complex can be as intricate as attempting to wholly comprehend the present reality of the situation facing young people, if not more so. Political and economic forces have realized the profit potential of every component of the iron triangle. There are few areas in the lives of children and youth around the world left to exploit for profit by either government, businesses, or nonprofit organizations. Without naming it as such, Giroux (2008, 2009) and others have deftly diagnosed and analyzed the indisputable role of neoliberalism within and throughout the Youth- Industrial Complex. The continuing rise of neoliberal youth services in all functions of society seems inevitable and nearly unstoppable, presenting itself as the engine for all innovation. Youth services have been reduced from their essential roles in building democratic society to become mere profit centers responsible for ensuring successful consumers within nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and philanthropic foundations that lack vision and misunderstand their dictums, inadvertently cloaking neoliberal marketplace investors' interests and intentions.

This positioning has established a battle between the forces of crass capitalism and socially minded community- builders. This is not a false dichotomy. Instead, it is inherent and apparent in the positioning of youth throughout society. While crass consumerism insists that youth simply arrive, partake of predetermined activities, products, and services, and then complete their terms as temporarily young, democratically minded people are repositioning young people as active co- creators throughout society who live in interdependent cultures supporting and sustaining their personal and collective possibilities, potential, and powers as members of the greater communities which all people belong to.

The future of the Youth- Industrial Complex is mired in this battle, positioning all nonprofits, all levels of governments, and all businesses as the beneficiaries of the dichotomous relationship they have with young people everywhere, all the time. This is not a conspiratorial relationship either. Instead, it is largely coincidental and circumstantial. However, coincidences and circumstances are nearly always present and affect every single person in society today.

Youth workers, teachers, businesspeople, doctors, organization administrators, elected officials, government workers, mental health counselors, police, and store staff all have to determine for themselves where, when, why, and how they interact, benefit, and critique the complex. However, it is youth themselves who offer the greatest possibility for challenging and defeating the invariably nefarious outcomes of the Youth- Industrial Complex. Rachel Jackson was a youth organizer fighting against the school- to- prison pipeline in California when she said,

Our youth are not failing the system; the system is failing our youth. Ironically, the very youth who are being treated the worst are the young people who are going to lead us out of this nightmare. (Fletcher & Vavrus, 2006, p. 6)

These prophetic words demonstrate the greatest hope society has in this battle for the souls, hearts, minds, and hands that can build, recreate, transform, and critique democracy today and in the future. Youth are the only hope. Let us see that and work from that place, now and forever more.

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