



Education and intimate war of position: The National Security League's Committee on Patriotism through Education, 1917–1919



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ABSTRACT

The National Security League was an elite private lobbying group in the World War I preparedness movement in the United States. Its educational wing was a group consisting mostly of college professors called the Committee on Patriotism through Education, which sought to use education to promote a militaristic brand of patriotism. This paper adds to our knowledge of the geopolitics of the period by critically reviewing the Committee's propaganda efforts, as organized into its Patriotism through Education Series. More importantly, this paper theorizes this propaganda by engaging with two literatures that seldom cross paths: emerging interest in intimacy-geopolitics and Gramsci's concept of war of position. Intimacy-geopolitics is used to highlight the performative edge of war propaganda, as it directs desire and affect to toward geopolitical visions which accord with elite visions of the good life. Intimacy-geopolitics as an analytical framework helps connect affect and war in a way that avoids scalar hierarchies of violence. The Committee deliberately sought to direct emotion toward militaristic ends, and saw teachers as foot soldiers in that effort. Understanding how war propaganda works through affect, that is, how it positions country as an object of affection, also qualifies and dovetails with an understanding of war propaganda as elemental to the Gramscian war of position. Quite apart from accusations of war-profiteering, elite manipulation of desire and affect toward the war effort also worked to obfuscate class interest in favor of gender and other social roles.

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1. Introduction

The National Security League (NSL) was a group of wealthy industrialists, lawyers, statesmen and academics that positioned itself as perhaps the most influential private lobbying group in the World War I 'preparedness movement' in the United States. The NSL had amongst its early designs increasing military expenditure and universal military training for young men. While putatively non-partisan, most members of the NSL were highly critical of the Woodrow Wilson Administration for what they perceived as an emasculating, unaggressive approach to military preparedness. When the National Defense Act of 1916 failed to include universal military training, nor a declaration of war on Germany, NSL leaders decided on a new approach – to educate an American public it perceived as soft, spoiled and indulgent on the need for a militaristic foreign policy. It thus created within its ranks a Committee on Patriotism through Education (hereafter Committee) with the

ostensible purpose of linking militarism with patriotic sentiment. The goal of the Committee, in the words of NSL founder Stanwood Menken (a prominent New York City attorney), was to create a "peripatetic university...which will, with the aid of hundreds of capable lecturers, spread the gospel" (Menken, 1917) of military preparedness¹. The Committee itself was made up primarily of college professors, which would travel the country providing lectures to public schools and universities, recruit new lecturers, publish preparedness literature, hold conferences training educators on the proper techniques of oratory, and generally advance the cause of militarism. Much of the educational propaganda produced by the Committee between the years 1917 and 1919 was organized into a series of pamphlets, reports and articles called the Patriotism through Education Series². This series forms the primary data set of

¹ Most NSL literature was not paginated in any reliable way, so quotes from it will not include page numbers.

² It had at least 36 installments, though a significant amount of NSL documentation was lost in a fire in 1942 (Edwards, 1982), making a precise reconstruction of its propaganda efforts impossible.

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this study, but will be buttressed by secondary literature, archival research and other publications of NSL members.

The purpose of this article is to bring into conversation the Gramscian idea of war of position (Gramsci, 1971) and more recent literature on intimacy-geopolitics (Cowen, 2004; Pain, 2015), vis-à-vis an exploration of the spatial and classed modalities through which the Committee sought to connect the intimate and the geopolitical. It thus adds to ongoing conversations amongst political and feminist geographers, which rigorously interrogate conventional understandings of scale (Hyndman, 2004) as the spatial context of ideologies of militarism and practices of militarization (Dowler, 2012). Directing this conversation to the specific logics and practices of the NSL helps make at least two valuable contributions: first, it helps explain why love of country was expressed through militarism rather than pacifism, and second, it shows why this form of intimacy-geopolitics, culturally constructed though it is, cannot be easily separated analytically from considerations of class interest.

While the NSL itself has not been frequently examined in geography (save for Schlosser, 2007), the first of the two points above has been thoroughly explored. The idea that patriotism and militarism are often linked through discourses of gender and the body is now well established (Christian, Dowler, & Cuomo, 2016; Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 1997 for example). Nguyen (2014) connects these conversations to education, providing a look into how the U.S. public school system has been positioned as a key agent in the ‘war on terror.’ She argues that “in this articulation of the role of schools, fighting the war on terror begins at home in our public schools, which conscripts students into the war effort by educating them for war and perpetuating fear and anxiety” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 128). We find similar logics and practices in NSL literature. For instance, the director of the Committee on Patriotism through Education, Princeton historian Robert McElroy, justified the Committee’s efforts on grounds that

the teachers like the soldiers of America, need the bayonet drill, the school of the squad, the school of the company and the school of the line. They must learn to use with precision these simple elementary ideas which once sent home to the minds of the children and thru the children to the minds and hearts of the parents, will give the unity of thought which is necessary to unity of action (McElroy, quoted in Edwards, 1982; 98–99).

The disciplinary practices McElroy advocates are emblematic of militarism defined generally as “an ideology that takes root in society via a process of perpetually preparing for war, reshaping cultural values, and reorienting the society’s collective worldview” (Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009, p. 399). That the militarization of schools was to be achieved through the hearts and minds of children and parents, particularly through the sentimentality of community, speaks to the relationality between the intimate and the geopolitical. Pratt and Rosner (2012) persuasively explain the value of an analytical focus on the intimate and the global, in that it side-steps the binary opposition of local-global. Intimacy-geopolitics as a framework sees the intimate and the geopolitical not in opposition but integral to each other (Pain, 2015). The story of the NSL’s work illustrated here recognizes Pain’s (2009) suggestion that emotion needs to be understood as situated, rather than local or global per se, but also suggests that even situated accounts of emotion can and should recognize the circulation of objects of emotional attachment that intersect with class. I also maintain that said circulation of objects of emotional attachment, similar to what Ahmed (2005) refers to as affective economies, is broadly congruent with Gramsci’s concept of war of position, through which we might understand the militarization directly advocated

in the McElroy quote above. This is particularly germane to the notion that minds and hearts should be mobilized towards unity of thought and action, and just what sort of plurality of interests is abstracted in the process, and to whose benefit. My broad claim, then, is that the Committee’s educational propaganda circulated visions of the good life that collapsed familial love with love of country. In doing so, they directed desire in such a way as to make intuitive the notion that an aggressive military posture was the way to express that love. I also argue that this was not simply a red herring to distract from class exploitation, but that it was also directly linked to arguments about how the war and post-war reconstruction industries should be managed. While intimacy-geopolitics and war of position are not always linked, their overlap in the production of a hegemonic militarism in the World War I era is demonstrable.

Intimacy-geopolitics and war of position as analytic frameworks are far from mutually exclusive. In contrast to deterministic understandings of class consciousness, Gramsci leaves room for genuine ‘conceptions of the world’ organic to particular class interests. Education can never be apolitical because it forms the ground upon which such conceptions vie for hegemonic status. War of position is thus a metaphor for political struggle, and indeed in the World War I era “schools swiftly became skirmishing sites” wrought with “ideological guerilla warfare” (Kennedy, 2004, p. 53). Contrary to some early 20th century Marxists, Gramsci recognizes that school children are not subjects interpolated into a hegemonic order (in an Althusserian sense), but are persons who participate, along with teachers, in the construction of that order (Hart, 2013). Gramsci (1971, 35) recognizes that children could never be “mechanical receivers” of instruction even if we wanted them to be, because the child’s consciousness “reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his family, his neighborhood, his village, etc.”. This confluence of state and social forces is the war of position in which “the superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 235). War of position is also an appropriate analytical frame in this case because NSL propaganda was actively resisted by pacifist groups such as the Women’s Peace Party (Zeiger, 1996), teacher’s organizations such as the American School Peace League (Zeiger, 2003), and prominent activists such as Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman (O’Leary, 1999) and Crystal Eastman (Edwards, 1982; Witt, 2004). The circulation of objects of emotional attachment is integral to this war of position.

The literature on intimacy-geopolitics is also varied, and fear as a form of governance is only one strand of it (Pain & Smith, 2008; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). It might also involve, for example, populations rendered less secure as the constitutive absence upon which state security is built (Williams & Massaro, 2013), or domestic violence as part of a continuum of war that is spatialized in ways that politicizes the geopolitical and depoliticizes the intimate (Christian et al., 2016; Pain, 2015). Cowen’s (2004) and Cowen and Gilbert’s (2008) work is especially relevant to my analysis. They argue that geopolitical discourse on the ‘war on terror’ works to redirect desire toward the heteronormative family. Cowen (2004; 757) describes this as “an intensely scalar strategy to harness new forms of desire in the name of reconfigured old patriarchs: the father, the family, the nation.” Directing desire and emotion in similar ways was a strategy consciously employed by the Committee; University of Wisconsin economics professor Richard Ely (1917), for example, advised speakers to show audiences pictures of the toll of war because “the intellect must be reached through the heart.” Moreover, we see those old patriarchs in much of the Committee’s literature. In the second installment of the Patriotism through Education Series, titled *What our country asks of its young*

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