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PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK IN PUBLIC SCHOOLING: PUBLIC SCHOOLS BEYOND THE CORPORATE MODEL

KENNETH J. SALTMAN*

The corporatization of schools is part of a broader assault on public and critical education and the aspirations of a critical democracy. By the “corporatization of public schools,” I refer here to both the privatization of public schools and the transformation of public schools on the model of the corporation. Corporatization involves the corporate model of organization being applied to social institutions that should not aim for the maximization of profit and growth. The corporate organization tends to be hierarchical if not authoritarian, sharing a form closer to the military than to that of participatory democracy. As public institutions, including schools, are remodeled on the corporation, their public and collective organization is replaced with authoritarian features. The ideology of corporate culture projects not only corporate models of governance and corporate modes of subjectivity and identification, but it also fosters consumerism. Consumerism redefines individual and collective values such that possessive individualism, acquisitiveness, and market-based forms of association replace civic values, collective political aspirations, and ethical pursuits.

In what follows, I schematize school corporatization in terms of economic, political, and cultural transformations. More specifically, I consider how the corporatization of public schools redistributes economic control and cultural control from the public to private interests. I argue that these intertwined redis-

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tributions of power undermine public democracy (the possibilities for the development of a more participatory and deeper democracy), just social transformation, and critical citizenship while exacerbating material and symbolic inequality.

Criticism of the corporatization of public education is predominantly restricted to the critical and radical political traditions. For example, one tends to find criticism of corporatization framed by liberal writers as "business involvement in schooling" or by the more limited notions of "privatization" or "school commercialism." From right-wing perspectives, views on corporatization range from fiscal conservatives who champion privatization to cultural conservatives whose agendas are abetted by privatization to cultural and religious conservatives who worry about the ways business involvement in schooling threatens the traditions of schooling they support. What distinguishes critical perspectives on corporatization is their focus on how privatization and the remaking of the school on the model of the corporation relates to broader social, political, economic, and cultural struggles. From the critical perspective, the public

1 I am referring to the traditions of critical pedagogy and critical theory as well as to the varieties of thought characterized by radical democracy with its focus on the expansion of egalitarian social relations and its emphasis on the priority of culture as well as the redistributive economic theories of the socialist tradition.

2 I discuss broadly the varieties of right-wing approaches to corporatization making a division between fiscal and cultural conservatives. For a more elaborate discussion of the varieties of rightist thought including neoliberalism, neoconservatism, religious fundamentalism and authoritarian populism, See, e.g., Michael Apple, Educating the Right Way (RoutledgeFalmer 2001).

3 Despite the centrality of broader social struggle and structural transformation, critical perspectives on corporatization are hardly identical and tend to map to the different political, economic, and cultural referents for theorizing the phenomenon. Criticism of corporatization can be found grounded in perspectives including Neo-marxist (Apple), Marxist (McLaren, Hill, etc.), critical theory, radical democracy (Giroux, Aronowitz, Trend), foucauldian (Ball), post-structuralist, pragmatist (Molnar, Boyles), and anarchist (Spring, Gabbard) with many authors drawing on multiple traditions.

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school is a site and stake of struggle for broader egalitarian social transformation. In each section, I discuss how the criticism of corporatization from a critical perspective differs from liberal and right-wing views.

The corporation today stands as arguably the most powerful social institution, eclipsing the centrality of power held historically by the Church and the State. The modern corporation has come to dominate nearly every social domain: agriculture, mass media and information, biological sciences, healthcare, energy, politics, etc. As the ultimate corporate mission, the capitalist imperative for the growth of financial profit at any cost, is injected into all social domains, the social effects are felt everywhere. One effect is commodification: all social and individual things and values appear increasingly for sale. The commodification of the social world imperils collective public values and collective political agency as well as the public deliberation necessary for democratic governance. Knowledge-making institutions, including schools and mass media, are hardly exempt from the effects of commodification.

Corporations have a disproportionate hold over information and the representation of the social world in ways that undermine the possibilities for meaningful political deliberation to take on issues of public import or to enact radical change by transforming the rules of the game. Entire sectors of the economy, such as mass media, share interests with energy, heavy industry, and military corporations. In nations theoretically dedicated to the promises of the liberal democratic political tradition, the imperatives for corporate profit have highly destruc-

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4 This critical view of hegemonic struggle can be traced from Gramsci to Althusser and can be seen in the critical response to corporatization in contemporary writers such as Apple, Giroux, Saltman, Leistyna, and numerous others. See, e.g., Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., Lawrence & Wishar 1987) (1971) and Louis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation, in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (Monthly Review Press 1971).
tive social effects: political campaigns are thoroughly based on advertising revenue and donations, political discourse is rendered all but meaningless as it is packaged into sound bites to fit between commercial messages, candidates are labeled as "electable" or "unelectable" by corporate media in ways that filter out candidates that pose a threat to corporate interests and values.

The corporate management and control of information in mass media shapes and limits public discourse. It stands as a dire warning for what the increasing corporate control of public schools will do to the possibilities for schools to address matters of dire public importance and schools' abilities to foster in students investigative habits and critical dispositions. Such critical dispositions enable students to develop as critical citizens linking subjects of study to broader historical struggles for power.

**CORPORATIZATION AND THE ECONOMIC CONTROL OF SCHOOLS**

Although corporate involvement in public schooling goes back to the beginnings of public schooling,5 the corporatization of public schools began in earnest in the early 1980s as part of the rise of neoliberal ideology.6 In the United States, public education has become increasingly privatized and subject to calls for further privatization while business and markets have come to influence or overtake nearly every aspect of the field of education. Privatization takes the form of for-profit management of schools, "performance contracting," for-profit charter schools,

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5 See Joel Spring, Educating the Consumer-Citizen (Lawrence Erlbaum Assocs. 2003).
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school vouchers, scholarship tax credits or "neovouchers," 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, to name but a partial list. These for-profit initiatives include the steady rise of school commercialism such as advertisements in textbooks, in-class television news programs that show mostly commercials such as Channel One, soft drink vending contracts dominated by Coca-Cola and Pepsi, sponsored educational materials that teach math with branded candy and sportswear, lessons in science and the environment by oil companies, and other attempts to hold youth as a captive audience for advertisers. The modeling of public schooling on business runs from classroom pedagogy that replicates corporate culture to the contracting out of management of districts to the corporatization of the curriculum to the "partnerships" that schools form with the business "community" that aim to market to kids.

PUBLIC SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION

The EMO, or Educational Management Organization, focuses on managing schools for profit, 94% of which are charter schools. As of 2008–2009, at least 95 EMOs were operating in 31 states with 339,222 students and at least 733 schools with nearly 80% of students in schools managed by the 16 largest EMOs. Major large companies include Edison Learning (62 schools), The Leona Group (67 schools), National Heritage Academies (57), White Hat Management (51), Imagine Schools, Inc. (76), Academica (54), the rapidly growing virtual online

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8 Id. at 6 and 18.
school company K12 (24), and Mosaica (33). The largest EMO in terms of number of students, The Edison Schools (now Edison Learning), has been beset by numerous financial and accountability scandals that, as I explain in my book, *The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education*, has less to do with corrupt individuals than with the impositions of privatization and the social costs of public deregulation.

Major privatization initiatives also include market-based voucher schemes allowed by the U.S. Supreme court and implemented by the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C. and in the gulf region following Hurricane Katrina. Education conglomerate companies such as Michael Milken's Knowledge Universe aim to amass a number of different education companies. These conglomerate companies hold a variety of for-profit educational enterprises, including test publishing, textbook publishing, tutoring services, curriculum consultancies, educational software development, publication, and sales, toy making, and other companies.

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9 *Id.* at 15.


In the U.S., the ESEA law ("No Child Left Behind") has fostered privatization by investing billions of public dollars in the charter school movement, which is pushing privatization with over three quarters of new charter schools being for-profit. NCLB is also requiring high-stakes testing, "accountability," and remediation measures that shift resources away from public school control and into control by test and textbook publishing corporations and for-profit remediation companies. For example, as The Edison Schools failed to profit financially as a "publicly-traded" company, the company shifted investment towards for-profit tutoring work through spin off companies.

Despite a number of failed experiments with performance contracting in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, for-profit education companies and their advocates have continued to claim that they could operate public schools better and cheaper than the public sector. This claim appears counter-intuitive: after all, how could an organization drain financial resources to profit investors and still maintain the same quality that the organization had with the resources that could be paying for more teachers, books, supplies, and upkeep?

Evidence appears on the side of intuition. To date, the evidence shows that it is not possible to run schools for profit while adequately providing resources for public education. This has been equally true whether the profit models are vouchers, charters, or performance contracting. In the largest experiments in for-profit management companies running schools, the public sector has heavily subsidized the private companies by pouring in higher per pupil funds. Nonetheless, the business sector, right-wing think tanks in and outside of academia, and corporate media continue to call for market-based approaches to public schooling. This has as much to do with ideology as with financial interest. For example, The Walton Family Foundation (the largest family owned business in the U.S. is Wal-Mart) is the largest spender lobbying for privatization schemes in the forms of vouchers and neo-voucher scholarships – in both cases,
public tax dollars are to be directed to spending on private schooling. Assuredly, this has less to do with plans of the company to open Wal-Schools or interest in the public schools developing highly educated and thoughtful Wal-Mart “greeters” capable of union organizing to break the anti-union commitments of the company than it does with the ideological beliefs of the Walton family that business works for them so business should be the model for schooling.

Advocates of public school privatization rely on a number of arguments for their economic claims: (1) the larger the company becomes, the more it can benefit from “economies of scale” to save costs through, for example, volume purchasing and running schools across multiple states; (2) the private sector is inherently more efficient than the public sector, because for-profit companies must compete with other companies; and (3) the private sector is more efficient, because the public sector is burdened by regulations and constraints such as teachers’ unions and the protections that they afford teachers that only get in the way of efficient delivery of educational services.

Proponents often justify commercialism and other for-profit initiatives on the grounds that they provide much needed income for under-funded public schools. However, even the business press, by 2002, recognized that education is not good business: schools have too many variable costs for economies of scale to work, and business would have to be spectacularly efficient to allow for quality and skimming of profits for owners and investors. The argument for “economies of scale” presumes that costs could be reduced through, for example, volume purchasing by a large education provider. The idea with Edison was that it would become the largest school district in the United States,

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thereby, giving it the largest purchasing power and financial leverage to demand low costs on supplies. To achieve this would involve a small number of massive companies running all of the nation’s schools which runs counter to the idealization of alternative and innovative models promised by the charter school movement. The fact that just a handful of Educational Management Organizations dominate about 80% of the for-profit management industry indicates a false promise of charter schools fostering “choice” and alternative and independent models. Instead, the homogenization of for-profit charter models appears more like fast food franchising.

Public districts can also benefit from economies of scale without having profit taken out of the system. The 2008 financial crisis and the implosion of entire industries, including financial services and automotive, show just how inefficient business can be; far from regulations being a hindrance, they provide necessary protections against abuse of teachers’ labor while providing financial transparency. As the largest ever experiment in privatization, The Edison Schools overworked teachers, misreported earnings, misreported test scores, counseled out low-scoring students, cheated on tests to show high performance to potential investors, and as they approached bankruptcy time and again, they revealed just how precarious and unaccountable that market imperatives can be when applied to education.14

An accusation that plagued Edison in local districts around the country was that if Edison is supposed to bring the efficiencies and cost-cutting of the private sector to schooling then why, as the editor of the Witchita Eagle asked, “does the model look so much like plain old panhandling,”15 by relying so heavily on philanthropic donations. In Louisiana, the post-Katrina New Orleans schools have been subject to the largest experiment in the privatization of an urban school district to date with a sys-

14 See Saltman, supra note 10.
tem dominated by privatized charter schools. As of the fall of 2009, the state board of education is seeking to add schools across Louisiana to the Recovery School District to radically reform them in accord with the Race to the Top dictates including turnarounds, chartering, and other privatized and managerialist approaches to reform.\textsuperscript{16} The point not to be missed about the accusation of “plain old panhandling,” and one that applies very much today in Louisiana, is that if business models of efficiency work so well, why aren’t the for-profit charter schools getting the same per pupil funding as the traditional public schools against which they are allegedly competing?

Since their inception, charters have relied disproportionately on philanthropic grants (the Gates Foundation put billions into charters), and now increasingly government handouts, including one-time payouts like money from the Katrina recovery funds and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In the Recovery School District, charters are receiving roughly double ($15,000) the per student money relative to the Orleans Parish School Board schools, yet, in traditional measures of student achievement compared by rate of improvement, the RSD lags behind the traditional public schools.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, the two major academic national studies of charters find that they, on the whole, do worse than traditional public schools in traditional measures of student achievement.\textsuperscript{18} It is important to realize


\textsuperscript{17} Robichaux, \textit{supra} note 16.

that in the past decade, charters have gotten support politically from the zealous support of the charter movement with national and state charter lobbying groups but also financially from the so called “venture philanthropies,” especially the Gates Foundation. The instability of charters comes in part from the fact that the extra money can and will dry up, both from these philanthropies and from the government. When this happens, for-profit charters will eventually go out of business. But not before doing all they can to cut costs which has historically included: displacing and underpaying local experienced teachers, hiring inexperienced teachers and burning them out while their salaries are low, using cheap, inexperienced Teach for America teachers and relying on alternative certification (both of which studies show are inferior to fully certified teachers), union-busting, manipulating test scores, importing cheap teachers from overseas, counseling, or pushing out special needs students and English language learners to raise test scores.

In the 1990s, the “cola wars” led to a race by soda companies to get vending machines and advertisements into schools. The subsequent public health crisis, that includes unprecedented epidemic levels of obesity and type II diabetes in young children, has given weight to multiple local struggles against school commercialism. School commercialism has grown steadily and taken

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19 Andrew Smarick of the American Enterprise Institute openly calls for replacing public schools with charter schools so that they can be easily closed within five years to accommodate a private industry in education in place of the public system. The ideal is what he calls “churn” or “creative destruction” that will allegedly hold the schools accountable by the possibility of going “out of business.” However, aside from the fact that public schools have different missions than private business the celebration of “churn” assumes a competitive industry which is at odds with the reality of a highly anti-competitive concentrated industry of EMO’s with most schools run by one of a few companies. Andrew Smarick, *The Turnaround Fallacy* 10 EDUC. NEXT 21, 26 (Winter 2010), available at http://educationnext.org/the-turnaround-fallacy/

20 Paul Vallas has imported teachers to Louisiana from the Philippines.
a much larger form than simply soft drink vending. Advertising in schools has reached new levels with sponsored educational materials (ads for Oreo cookies integrated into math lessons), ads lining school hallways, the sides of school buses and scoreboards, marketing to students in schools, electronic marketing, promotional contests (such as those run by Pizza Hut and Domino’s), and Channel One, an advertising-driven, faux-news program launched by Christopher Whittle, the magazine entrepreneur who would go on to create the Edison Schools.

From a liberal and critical perspective, the privatization of public schools and the ideology of corporate culture need to be opposed. For liberals, the goal is to strengthen public schools. Corporatization undermines the liberal promises of public schooling to make educated human beings and a thoughtful participating polity. From a liberal perspective, even though historically the public sector has failed to universally provide quality educational services equally to everyone, that remains the goal. In this view, the expansion of the “best” schools, that is, those schools from class and racial privilege, remain the model. Liberals, like Jonathan Kozol, highlight the spending disparities between rich, predominantly white schools and poor, predominantly African-American and Latino schools. Per pupil, rich schools get as much as four times more money than poor schools do while poor schools actually need more than rich schools do. For liberals, the project of educational equality is very much defined by the equalization of educational resources towards the goal of inclusion – the equalization of educational opportunity is supposed to translate into economic and political opportunity for participation in existing institutions. For criticalists, the defense of public schools is about defending the public sector towards the goal of critical transformation of the political and economic systems via political and cultural struggle waged through civil society. In this sense, the cultural struggle to make

21 MOLNAR, supra note 12.
public schools the sites for the making of critical consciousness is crucial and is distinct from the liberal perspective.

**Corporatization and the Cultural Control of Schools**

The cultural aspect of corporatizing education involves transforming education on the model of business, describing education through the language of business, and the emphasis on the “ideology of corporate culture” that involves making meanings, values, and identifications compatible with a business vision for the future. The business model appears in schools in the push for standardization and routinization that emphasizes standardization of curriculum, standardized testing, methods-based instruction, teacher de-skilling, scripted lessons, and a number of approaches aiming for “efficient delivery” of instruction. The business model presumes that teaching, like factory production, can be ever sped up and made more efficient through technical modifications to instruction and incentives for teachers and students, like cash bonuses. Holistic, critical, and socially-oriented approaches to learning that understand pedagogical questions in relation to power are eschewed as corporatization instrumentalizes knowledge, disconnecting knowledge from the broader political, ethical, and cultural struggles informing interpretations and claims to truth while denying differential material power to make meanings.

Business metaphors, logic, and language have come to dominate policy discourse. For example, advocates of privatizing public schools often claim that public schooling is a “monopoly,” that public schools have “failed,” that schools must “compete” to be more “efficient.” Advocates further argue that schools must be checked for “accountability,” while parents ought to be allowed a “choice” of schools from multiple educational providers, as if education were like any other consumable commodity. Shifting public school concerns onto market language frames
our public concerns with equality, access, citizenship-formation, democratic educational practices, and questions of whose knowledge and values constitute the curriculum.

As an offshoot of corporatization, market language and justifications for schooling eradicate the political and ethical aspects of education. Within the view of corporatization, students become principally consumers of education and clients of teachers rather than democratic citizens in the making, who will need the knowledge and intellectual tools for meaningful participatory governance. Teachers become deliverers of services rather than critical intellectuals, while knowledge becomes discreet units of product that can be cashed in for jobs rather than thinking of knowledge in relation to broader social concerns and material and symbolic power struggles—the recognition of which would be necessary for the development of genuinely democratic forms of education.

School commercialism is the most publicized aspect of public school privatization. This owes largely to liberal assumptions that commercialism taints the otherwise neutral and objective space of the school with business ideologies. From the progressive and radical traditions, such liberal horror at, for example, ads for junkfood in textbooks is naïve, because the school is already understood as a political “site and stake” in struggles for hegemony by different groups including classes, races, and genders.22 Schools teach the knowledge and skills necessary for students to take their places as workers and managers in the

22 State run schools in capitalist nations being a “site and stake” of struggle for hegemony appears in the work of Antonio Gramsci and is developed from Gramsci by Louis Althusser. See Althusser, supra note 4 and Louis Althusser, Machiavelli and Us (François Matheron, ed., Gregory Elliot, trans., Verso 1999). The limitations of the reproduction theories have been taken up extensively and importantly for example with regard to the theoretical problems of Marxism including the legacies of scientism, class reductionism, economism, etc. See, e.g., Stanley Aronowitz & Henry Giroux, Education: Still Under Siege (Bergin & Garvey 1993). Despite these limitations, Althusser’s work appears important for theorizing the state at the present juncture.
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economy. Skills and know how are taught in ideological forms conducive to social relations, that are, in turn, conducive to the reproduction of relations of production. In the 1970s, this was dubbed the “hidden curriculum”: students learn to be docile workers from teachers who emulate the boss; tests and grades prepare students for understanding compartmentalized, and often meaningless, tasks and numerically quantifiable rewards that are extrinsic; earning grades prepares kids to work for money; school bells segment time in ways conducive to shift work while desks are arrayed with the teacher/boss at the big desk and the student/workers at the little desks. All of this suggests that the space of school is hardly free of capitalist ideology from the outset. As Henry Giroux has suggested, the hidden curriculum is no longer hidden. As neoliberal ideology has resulted in the triumph of market fundamentalism in an overt fashion to all realms of social life, schooling has been remade on the model of the market.

CORPORATIZATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

Contemporary initiatives to corporatize public schools can only be understood in relation to neoliberal ideology that presently dominates politics. Neoliberalism, a form of radical fiscal conservatism, alternately described as “neoclassical economics” and “market fundamentalism,” originates with Frederic Von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and the “Chicago boys” at the Univer-

24 Neoliberalism in education has been taken up extensively by a number of authors. A very partial and incomplete and U.S.-focused list includes: Apple, supra note 2; Defending Public Schools (David A. Gabbard & E. Wayne Ross eds., Praeger 2004); Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools (Kenneth J. Saltman & David A. Gabbard eds., 2003); Giroux, The Abandoned Generation, supra note 23; Giroux, The Terror of Neoliberalism, supra note 6; Goodman & Saltman, supra note 6; Saltman, Collateral Damage, supra note 6.
The University of Chicago in the 1950s. Within this view, individual and social ideals can best be achieved through the unfettered market. In its ideal forms (as opposed to how it is practically implemented), neoliberalism calls for privatization of public goods and services, decreased regulation on trade, loosening of capital and labor controls by the state, and the allowance of foreign direct investment. In the view of neoliberalism, public control over public resources should be shifted out of the hands of the necessarily bureaucratic state and into the hands of the necessarily efficient private sector.

In education, neoliberalism has taken hold with tremendous force, remaking educational common sense and pushing forward the privatization and deregulation agendas. The steady rise of all of the reforms and the shift to business language and logic mentioned in the earlier sections can be understood through the extent to which neoliberal ideals have succeeded in taking over educational debates. Neoliberalism appears in the now commonsense framing of education exclusively through presumed ideals of upward individual economic mobility (the promise of cashing in knowledge for jobs) and the social ideals of global economic competition. The "TINA" (There Is No Alternative to the Market) thesis that has come to dominate politics throughout much of the world has infected educational thought. The only questions on reform agendas appear to be how to best enforce knowledge and curriculum conducive to national economic interest and the expansion of a corporately managed model of globalization as perceived from the perspective of business.

What is dangerously framed out within this view is the role of democratic participation in societies ideally committed to democracy and the role of public schools in preparing public democratic citizens with the tools for meaningful and participatory self-governance. By reducing the politics of education to its economic roles, neoliberal educational reform has deeply authoritarian tendencies that are incompatible with democracy. The case
of the Edison Schools, the largest experiment to date in a for-profit company running public schools, clearly illustrates the political stakes in the corporatization of public schools. It also sets the stage for discussing the directions of the Obama administration’s corporate-oriented and aggressively pro-charter school reform agenda.

**The Edison Schools: Illustrating the Struggle for the Public Sphere**

Part of what is at stake in the corporatization of schools is the diminishment of the public sphere. Some, such as British sociologist of education, Stephen Ball, have recently suggested that the distinction between public and private in education is too blurry and complex to allow a meaningful distinction between public and private or to justify defending public schools and that it is not clear what public values in education might be.\(^{25}\) Ball appears alternately critical of and sympathetic to projects that allow corporations to contract with the state to run schools. There are at least four clear ways that those committed to democratic education must understand about how public control differs from private control. The Edison Schools\(^ {26}\) model offers and instructive illustration:

a) Public versus private ownership and control: Edison is able to skim public tax money that would otherwise be reinvested in educational services and shunt it to investor profits. These profits take concrete form through the limousines and jet airplanes and mansions that public tax money provides to entrepreneur and majority owner Chris Whittle. They also take symbolic form as they are used to hire public relations firms to influence par-

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\(^{25}\) **Stephen J. Ball**, *Education PLC: Understanding Private Sector Participation in Public Sector Education* (Routledge 2007).

\(^{26}\) See **Saltman**, *supra* note 10.
ents, communities, and investors to have faith in the company. This parasitical financial relationship results in the management of schools in ways that seek to maximize the potential profit for investors while cutting costs. This has also resulted in anti-unionism, the reduction of education to the most measurable and replicable forms, assaults on teacher autonomy, etc. There is no evidence that the draining of public wealth and its siphoning to capitalists has improved public education or that it is required for the improvement of public education. If the state is going to use privatization as a tool (as the advocates of the Third Way in the UK do), then they could exercise authoritative state action directly in ways that do not upwardly redistribute wealth or funnel such wealth into misrepresenting the public influence and effects of privatization.

b) Public versus private governance: there are numerous aspects of the transformation in governance accompanying privatization including the shift away from community governance, union governance, and the shift to business group governance. In Chicago, public schools are being closed under “Renaissance 2010” and reopened as for-profit and non-profit charter schools. Such schools are robbed of their community school councils, and business dominated councils are installed. With Edison, decisions regarding the use of resources shift from community to a management team with a financial stake in particular outcomes. More troubling is that taxpayer money is used to facilitate Edison’s profit and then reinvested in public relations firms that lobby and influence the community (the public) to support Edison—a private venture.
c) Public versus private cultural politics: privatization affects the politics of the curriculum. A company like Edison cannot have a critical curriculum that makes central, for example, the ways corporatization threatens democratic values and ideals. While most public schools do not have wide-ranging critical curricula, the crucial issue is that some do and most could. This is a matter of public struggle. Privatization forecloses such struggle by shifting control to private hands and framing out possibilities that are contrary to institutional and structural interest. The possibility of developing and expanding critical pedagogical practices are a casualty of privatization.

d) Public versus private forms of publicity and privacy including secrecy and transparency. Private companies are able to keep much of what they do secret. Edison could selectively reveal financial data and performance data that would further its capacity to lure investors. Such manipulation is endemic to privatization schemes.

Collapsing public and private naturalizes public education as a private business despite fundamentally different missions.

As public schools are privatized, they are subject to a market-based logic of achievement in which knowledge becomes a commodity to consume and regurgitate. Knowledge can be cashed in for grades, the grades can be cashed in for promotion, and the promotion can be cashed in for jobs and cash in the economy. The over-emphasis on standards and standardization, testing, and “accountability” replicate a corporate logic in which measurable task performance and submission to authority become central. Intellectual curiosity, investigation, teacher autonomy, and critical thought, not to mention critical theory, have no place in this view.
The charter school movement is seldom recognized as an aspect of corporatization. Yet it typifies the social costs of the neoliberal ideals of deregulation and managerialism as they play out in education. Charter schools aim to minimize the “bureaucratic red tape” alleged to be responsible for problems faced by traditional public schools. A business metaphor of efficiency is merged with a celebration of entrepreneurial experimentation to suggest that public regulations keep schools from being efficient and that the entrepreneurial spirit of the private sector is all that is needed. The central idea of “efficiency” defined by ever increasing test scores is cast as the only way to understand quality. The neoliberal mantra of deregulation is applied to create public schools not subject to unions, with reduced administrative controls, and in many cases, public oversight. To date, there is no evidence of charter schools being better than traditional public schools. Charter schools weaken the public mission of universally good public schools and set the stage for further privatization. The charter movement is frequently justified on the market metaphor of “choice,” suggesting that individual parents and students can maximize themselves as individual consumers by “shopping for schools.” This market metaphor wrongly suggests increased educational opportunity while concealing the different resources and capacities that parents have to make choices in a capitalist economy. Money, social networks, and cultural capital\(^{27}\) give parents of class and cultural privilege abilities to game the system better than poor and working class parents. In this sense, charters stand to replicate existing inequalities rather than ameliorate them.

The Edison Schools, again, provide a ready example of the ways that privatization as a form of corporatization puts into place economism and anti-criticality. As Edison was struggling to expand to become profitable, it had to show investors steadily

improving test scores. The profitability of the company was contingent upon its continued expansion to be able to achieve “economies of scale” in order to deliver more than the public schools could while skimming out profit at the same time. The possibility of expanding the business and becoming profitable depended upon getting more investor capital. Investors needed to see evidence that Edison was superior quality to the public schools. So Edison put tremendous pressure on schools to achieve higher and higher test scores to show investors and to use in public relations. This resulted in reports of teachers cheating on tests and encouraging students to cheat on tests.

What is more, the tests became synonymous with educational quality. The possibilities of critical forms of education that engage with power-relations, politics, and ethics are foreclosed when in conflict with the institutional interests of the company running the school. Put differently, will an Edison school ever include meaningful criticism of corporate power as part of its curriculum? Can it? Moreover, Edison and other educational privatizers target poor and working class communities. That is, they target those communities that have been historically short-changed by inadequate funding. These are students slated largely for the low paying end of the economy. Critical curriculum and school models could provide the means for theorizing and acting to challenge the very labor exploitation that schools such as these prepare students to submit to.

Edison does not target schools in economically and racially privileged communities for privatization. Privileged schools not only benefit from success at capturing the bounty of public wealth, but they also prepare students for the critical thinking necessary to take management and leadership roles in the economy. Of course, critical thinking in the form of problem solving

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skills is very different from the kind of critical theorizing that would allow students to comprehend the social and individual costs of their privilege and to learn to labor for something other than the corporate dream of unfettered consumption. As the only concern becomes one of the efficient enforcement of the “right” knowledge, critical engagement, investigation, and intellectual curiosity appear as impediments to learning, and teachers are deskilled deliverers of prepackaged curricula prohibiting their potential as critical intellectuals.

OBAMA’S BETRAYAL OF PUBLIC AND CRITICAL EDUCATION?

Despite campaigning on progressive political ideals, the Obama Administration has put in place a neoliberal education agenda that treats public schooling as a private market, celebrates the business metaphors of competition and choice, treats knowledge as a commodity, frames the role of education as principally for making consumers and workers for a corporate dominated economy, and pushes cash bonuses tied to test scores. The selection of Chicago Public Schools “CEO” Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education marks an attack on teachers’ unions, an embrace of privatization, and a view that educational reform ideally ought to be designed and led by business.29 Moreover, the Obama promotion of charter schools as a central thrust of reform represents not only a part of a broader push for privatization as most new schools being run by for-profit companies are being opened as charters, but it also enacts the ideal of forcing public schools to “compete” against privatized schools while parents and students are framed as “consumers” who “shop” for schools. This betrays a value on a universally public provision, and it fails to take seriously the historical legacy of both extreme racial segregation and extremely unequal distribution of educa-

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tional resources. Charters as the grand solution does nothing to remedy either historical problem. It does, however, misrepresent these historical inequalities by framing them in the neoliberal fashion as problems caused by “too much regulation” and “too much public bureaucracy” rather than recognizing that these unequal educational conditions are the result of a century of failed business-led school reform and a public school system beholden to private property tax wealth. Of course, with the financial crisis of 2008 brought on by deregulation of financial markets, the neoliberal unfettered idealization of deregulation appears as increasingly preposterous. Nonetheless, the market metaphors continue to hold tremendous power in education.

Democracy is under siege by neoliberalism’s tendency to conflate politics and the public with economics, thereby translating all social problems into business concerns. Yet, democracy is also under siege by a rising authoritarianism in the U.S. that guts civil liberties and assaults human rights domestically and internationally in the form of the USA Patriot Act, “extraordinary rendition” (state sanctioned kidnapping, torture, and murder), spying on the public, and other measures that dangerously expand executive power. Rather than reversing these authoritarian policies initiated under the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration has opted instead to largely continue them. Internationally, these policies take the form of what David Harvey has termed “The New Imperialism” and others have called militarized globalization that includes the so called “war on terror,” the U.S. military presence in more than 140 countries, the encirclement of the world’s oil resources with the world’s most powerful military, etc. This comes in addition to a continued culture of militarism that educates citizens to identify with militarized solutions to social problems. The crux of this involves educating students into authoritarian social relation-

30 See Dorothy Shipps, School Reform, Corporate Style (Univ. Press of Kansas 2006).
ships, such as the corporal control of the students’ bodies, but it also takes increasingly overt form of transforming schools to look like the military and to do its recruitment. In education, this militarism is “education as enforcement,” one that involves enforcing global neoliberal imperatives through numerous educational means.\textsuperscript{32}

For Harvey, the structural problems behind global capitalism remain the financialization of the global economy and the Marxian crisis of overproduction driving down prices and wages while glutting the market and threatening profits. Capitalists and states representing capitalist interests respond to these crises through Harvey’s version of what Marx called primitive accumulation, “accumulation by dispossession.”\textsuperscript{33}

As Harvey and Perelman explain, privatization is one of the most powerful tools of accumulation by dispossession, transforming publicly owned and controlled goods and services into private and restricted ones—the continuation of “enclosing the commons” begun in Tudor England.\textsuperscript{34}

There is a crucial tension presently between two fundamental functions of public education for the capitalist state. The first involves reproducing the conditions of production: teaching skills and know how in ways that are ideologically compatible with the social relations of capital accumulation. Public education remains an important and necessary tool for capital to make political and economic leaders or docile workers and marginalized citizens or even participating in sorting and sifting out those to be excluded from economy and politics completely. The second function that appears to be relatively new and growing involves the capitalist possibilities of pillaging public education for profit. Drawing on Harvey’s explanation of ac-

\textsuperscript{32} See Education as Enforcement, supra note 24.
\textsuperscript{33} See Harvey, supra note 6, at 160-65; See also Michael Perelman, The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation (Duke Univ. Press 2000).
\textsuperscript{34} Perelman, supra note 33, at 13-24; Harvey, supra note 6.
cumulation by dispossession, we see that in the U.S. the numerous strategies for privatizing public education follows a pattern of destroying and commodifying schools, where the students are redundant to reproduction processes. A dual system is being created in which the public schools that are designed to turn out managers and leaders for the top of the economy will be left in place. However, the public schools that currently largely warehouse students and are increasingly resembling prisons and the military produce a surplus of future workers for the low end of the economy. These students who are being produced as docile and disciplined students to become docile and disciplined workers are being targeted for privatization so that an immediate profit can be made from them in addition to the deferred profit that can be made from them in the future when they do exploitative low pay, no benefit labor at the bottom of the economy. Essentially, the profits that are made by for-profit prisons is the model for the new educational privatization. Rather than addressing the funding inequalities and the intertwined dynamics at work in making poor schools, the remedy of the privatizers is commodification.

The neoliberal denial of politics and conflation of democratic politics and market economics is particularly evident in the Obama Administration’s approach to education. Obama and his pick of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education repeatedly assert that educational improvement should not be ideologically driven but rather driven by “what works.”

Obama spoke directly to this in an interview that was aired on C-Span.

**OBAMA:** Well, I think what it means is that I don’t approach problems by asking myself, is this a conservative—is there a conservative approach to this or a liberal approach to this, is there a Democratic or Republican approach to this. I come at it and say, what’s the way to solve the problem, what’s the way to achieve an outcome
where the American people have jobs or their health care quality has improved or our schools are producing well-educated workforce of the 21st century. And I am willing to tinker and borrow and steal ideas from just about anybody if I think they might work. And we try to base most of our decisions on what are the facts, what kind of evidence is out there, have programs or policies been thought through. I spend a lot of time sitting with my advisors and just going through a range of options. And if they are only bringing me options that have been dusted off the shelf, that are the usual stale ideas, then a lot of times I ask them, well, what do our critics say, do they have ideas that maybe we haven’t thought of.\textsuperscript{35}

Obama’s declaration of post-ideographic practicalism denies his own political agenda while laying out a political agenda. For example, he defines what works for education in the same breath as workforce preparedness, a view of education from the perspective of business. Obama’s practicalism evades the questions of “what works to achieve what ends,” for whom, why? There are troubling roots to Obama’s practicalism in the organizing tradition of Saul Allinsky in Chicago. Allinsky’s \textit{Rules for Radicals} makes the case for a project based kind of politics defined by short term gains in which proponents of a project should make deals with ideological opponents if it will achieve the ends. There are serious ethical problems in such a view as repayment of the political support often results in organizers later supporting projects that they cannot ethically endorse.

Obama’s denial of politics harkens back to the neoliberal post-politics of the Clinton Administration, and indeed, most of Obama’s administration is reconstructed from that one. John Podesta who was Clinton’s chief-of-staff led the transition team and drew heavily from his own think tank, the Center for American Progress, that straddles the liberal and neoliberal agendas for education reform. It is a mistake to think that school privatization is a Republican party or Democratic party issue. Both candidates in the 2008 presidential election spoke of the need to inject “competition” and “choice” into the education system. In November of 2009, the American Enterprise Institute, which is a leading pro-privatization think tank with a Republican party orientation, teamed up with the Center for American Progress, led by Clinton’s Chief of Staff and Obama’s transition head, John Podesta, to issue a report called “Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report on Educational Innovation.” The report came out as Race to the Top was finalized so that each state could know where it stood in relation to the desired reforms of Race to the Top, which follows much the same rationale of No Child Left Behind and dangles money in front of states to enjoin them to expand charter schools, tie teacher evaluation and merit pay systems to standardized test scores, and encourage local districts to dismiss entire staffs of thousands of “failing” schools. While both political parties see education like business, the difference is that the Democratic Party sees privatization strategies as a tool for public school improvement. For the political far right, the public system has failed, and charters are an interim measure on the way to ending public education and replacing it with publicly funded private schooling. What the advocates for charters, who want to strengthen public education, do not seem to realize is that once traditional public schools are transformed into charters, they are easy to close and replace with private providers. Despite the frequently expressed rhetoric of “evi-
"Evidence," the push for privatization is based less in evidence and far more in ideology and profit-seeking.  

The post-politics, post-ideology claims from the Obama Administration are limited and shortsighted in the ways that they deny power struggles over competing interests and ideologies as well as material resources. The denial of political struggle for competing values and visions, ideas, and ideologies in favor of post-ideological consensus undermines public participation in forging collective futures. As political theorist Chantal Mouffe writes,

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies [to be destroyed]. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism.

We can add here that the critical possibilities of public schooling likewise foster democratic culture by both recognizing the inevitable antagonism at the core of the social but also by teaching the theoretical and political tools for hegemonic struggle.

Neoliberal education is authoritarian in its active denial of politics in favor of the magic of the market. Neoliberal education is fundamentalist in two ways: it is a manifestation of mar-


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Market fundamentalism while denying that there is a politics to the managerial role of markets. The neoliberal perspective wrongly insists that free markets govern democratically as people vote with their dollars. What the neoliberal view misses altogether is how the economy functions politically to position people hierarchically based on their capacities to act in the market – capacities to act which are hardly equally distributed.

RECOVERING THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC SCHOOLING: THE NEED FOR CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND POLICIES

In the progressive tradition, public deliberation on matters of public importance is struggled over by citizens and groups. Culture in the progressive tradition is to be interrogated rather than worshipped or feared. What is common throughout the progressive tradition is the idea that acts of interpretation become central to acts of political intervention and participation. That is, in the progressive tradition, the meaning of democracy and the contents of democracy, as well as the contents of the culture, are subject to interpretive struggle. The progressive tradition understands democracy as dynamic rather than static, as shot through with multiple power struggles, and as a quest and process, rather than an achieved state that must be fixed and held and protected from corruption. In the progressive educational tradition, a

38 See, e.g., John E. Chubb & Terry M. Moe, Politics, Markets, and America's Schools (Brookings Inst. 1990), for the classic neoliberal formulation of this position, and Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (Univ. of Chicago Press 1982).

39 Much of the literature on reproduction theory in education confronts this. See, e.g., Samuel Bowles & Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life (Routledge 1976). See also the forms of capital addressed by Pierre Bourdieu, as well as the more recent literature on neoliberalism in education by authors such as Giroux, Hursh, Goodman, Buras, Apple, and my books, Collateral Damage, supra note 6; The Edison Schools, supra note 10; and Capitalizing on Disaster, supra note 7.
democratic society requires citizens capable of not just functional literacy but also critical literacies.\textsuperscript{40}

Public schools are unique in that they hold the public potential to foster such democratic dialogue and debate rather than being reception centers for the knowledge, values, and virtues handed down by self-proclaimed experts. Public school corporatization threatens the possibility for public schools to develop as places where knowledge, pedagogical authority, and experiences are taken up in relation to broader political, ethical, cultural, and material struggles informing competing claims to truth. Struggles against these ideologies and their concrete political manifestations must link matters of schooling to other domestic and foreign policies. Incumbent upon progressive educators and cultural workers is to imagine new forms of public educational projects and to organize to take back privatized educational resources for public control.

Although historically public education in the U.S. has functioned to reproduce racial, class, and gender oppression, among others, it has also been central to, if not at the forefront, of social movements such as civil rights and grassroots multiculturalism. Public schooling has also been open to ongoing experimentation, tinkering, and has been responsive to intellectual movements across the political spectrum, including good ones like progressivism and bad ones like scientific management. More importantly, beyond responding to social and cultural trends outside of schools, public schools themselves are sites of cultural production. The cultural politics of education do not go away. In other words, teachers as cultural producers are inevitably engaged in making meanings, values, ideologies, and identifications.

The crucial questions are under what conditions and with what constraints do they do so. The sanction of commercialism,
for example, produces commercial meanings and values, makes subjects as principally consumers, and undermines citizenship and the very notion of the public. School commercialism can be taken up critically, however, if teachers highlight the kinds of values, ideologies, and interests represented by a particular product. Such analysis ought to include a focus on the material and symbolic interests embedded in the cultural text as well as analysis of what kinds of identifications and identities such commercial culture asks students to become. The possibilities of critical pedagogical engagement with corporatization highlights the limitations of the liberal approaches to it. For example, liberal approaches to school commercialism end with the demand to keep public schools free of commercial content. Critical pedagogy offers the capacity to use commercialism to criticize the broader structures of power informing its very presence in the school.

There is already an enormous defensive backlash against such anti-critical movements as the standardization of curriculum and the high stakes testing regime. But progressives need to take the offensive by putting forward critical curriculum and approaches and pursuing concrete goals to take back public spaces. What should not be forgotten is that while the battle for critical public schools and against corporatization is valuable as a struggle in itself, it should also be viewed as an interim goal to what ought to be the broader goals of the left: to redistribute state and corporate power from elites to the public while expanding critical consciousness and a radically democratic ethos.