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Molnar, Alex. (2005). *School commercialism: From democratic ideal to market commodity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Most people hold onto a barely concealed skepticism, if not outright disdain, toward marketing and advertising. Both may be ubiquitous in day-to-day life, yet there continues to be a kernel of popular wisdom that resists the hype. Alex Molnar both draws on and wants to reawaken this suspicion in his new book, which examines how various commercial initiatives – from the advertising-driven Channel One, to exclusive vending machine contracts in school districts, to for-profit schools run by companies like the Edison Project and other market-centred charter schools – threaten the future of American education.

Part of Routledge's *Positions Series*, *School Commercialism* (2005) is located at the intersection of "education, politics, and culture" (p. vii). It challenges the Bush Administration's *No Child Left Behind* act; it is short, polemical and intended mostly to bridge the divide between academic research and public debate. Moving between these worlds is never easy, but Molnar is ideally suited for the task. As the Director of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory in the College of Education at Arizona State University at Tempe, Molnar is recognized as the foremost American critic of school commercialism. Research from the Policy Studies Lab has been crucial in tracking the development and impact of commercialism and privatization in the K-12 school system. At the same time, Molnar is also a public intellectual who has had a presence in the mainstream media (e.g., in the *New York Times* and *People Magazine*, and on ABC's *Nightline* and CBS's *This Morning*) since the early 1990s. In this book, Molnar revisits issues raised in his earlier and longer text, *Giving kids the Business* (1996). Here, his critique of commercialism in public schools focuses on two central arguments:

On the one hand, Molnar draws on John Dewey to anchor what he and many of us consider a necessary relationship between education and democracy. For Dewey, schools were meant to be "laboratories of democracy in which students [learn]

democratic habits of cooperation and public service by living them in the classroom" (p. 80). When schools achieve this all of us are afforded greater opportunity for a vital life within "an engaged democratic community built on rational interactions" (p. 80). The more advertising, sponsored curricula, fast food, and other forms of commercialism seep into public schools, however, the more these institutions fall prey to what Dewey called, "mis-educative" experiences. Such experiences arrest or distort "the growth of further experience" (Dewey quoted on page 81). They don't create an informed public, or a curious public, or an active public. Rather, advertising and marketing "systematically [set] out to undermine the ability of people to make rational judgments" (p. 78). Instead of working "in the service of the individual and the community, advertising seeks to destroy continuity and fragment experience, and encourages us to give into our irrational impulses for the purpose of manipulating our behavior" (p. 84). In short, marketing produces "sponsored lives" (p. 84).

Commercial activities in schools are of course not new: in fact Molnar traces early developments from the beginning of the twentieth century (pp. 16-18). Yet 1989 – the year Channel One was launched – is a bellwether for the expansion of school-based marketing (p. 10). Since then Molnar provides ample evidence that sponsorship programs, exclusive vending agreements, incentive programs (through partnerships with Pizza Hut and McDonald's, etc.), electronic marketing, privatization through the use of for-profit companies to manage schools, and other fund raising initiatives have all expanded a commercial presence in schools. Compounding this, outside the classroom marketing is the wallpaper and sound scape of children's lives. It fills young people's days from the moment they wake up in sheets decorated with the latest Disney character until the moment they go to bed in pajamas festooned with other pop culture figures (p. 1-2). Because of this, Molnar tells us, how commercialization alters the democratic nature of school spaces is sometimes difficult to see. "It blends seamlessly with the marketing maelstrom that defines contemporary American culture" (p. 70).

Developing brand consciousness and brand loyalty among children and youth remain the holy grail of marketing. To serve these ends, schools are an ideal and hugely desirous location for targeting kids. In one institution, an otherwise disparate market segment is captive and organized by age. Even more, because children experience school-based advertising in what is otherwise thought to be a public institution legitimacy is conferred on marketers' actions (p. 7). By participating in schools, in other words, corporate America is able to buy a degree of community good will while selling directly to kids in a focused environment.

School commercialism also serves two other functions: it provides a podium to disseminate corporate ideas and values; and, most significantly, it provides an essential venue for spreading the notion that consumption itself is the most important framework within which personal and social happiness, meaning and fulfillment can be found (p. 44). This latter function is really where corporate activity poses a significant challenge to the integrity of schools. As Molnar explains, through the increased presence of corporate culture the work of schools shifts from a site that develops young people as engaged learners and active citizens to a site that produces consumers who are brand conscious and brand loyal, and at an increasingly younger age. "The more corporate special interests are allowed to influence what schools teach – and, by extension, limit what they cannot teach – the less students are seen as active citizens-to-be, and the more they are seen as passive consumers-to-be-sold" (p. 45). The legacy of John Dewey thus gives way to the logic of public relations and American schools are the worse for this.

Molnar tells us targeting students in schools is immoral and pernicious because children, by definition, cannot draw on the same critical resources as adults to protect themselves from the sophisticated invitations of the marketplace. Moreover, the danger of such invitations is they contribute to a rising "tide of materialism in young people . . . [that] is linked directly to personally and socially harmful outcomes, including increased smoking, drinking, and illegal drug use; a series of mental health disorders . . . ; and antisocial behaviours, including carrying weapons, skipping school, and

vandalism" (Schor, 2004, p. 9). To this list must be added the growing obesity rates among children, which coincides with the increasing role of fast food companies in schools (p. 57). Where these results suggest the dangers of school commercialism, ironically, partnerships with cola and fast food companies have not proven to be the financial windfall schools have been promised (pp. 55-56). Yet the partnerships, the logo-licensing agreements, and the sponsored classroom resources continue, begging the question, why? This leads to Molnar's second central argument.

The drive to commercialize schools, Molnar tells us, has to do with the vulnerability of the institution itself, a situation made all the more acute by funding cutbacks in education across the US over the past two decades. "Schools seek corporate money because they find themselves unable to meet the demands of their daily tasks relying solely on the resources available to them from traditional means: local, state, and federal tax dollars" (p. 29). This problem is most acute in poorer school districts where students cost more to teach because schools are asked to fulfill a different and more complex set of roles in students' lives (p. 105). Because of this, today "marketers are arbiters of the condition of public education" (p. 12). One result is "schools must inevitably be seen and portrayed as failing [because the] nature of marketing is to promote dissatisfaction. Corporations create the itch, then collect the money from us to scratch it" (pp 12-13).

Perhaps the best example of a corporation that has created this itch is The Edison Project, a for-profit learning company that has been at the centre of the school privatization movement. While offering a detailed history of Edison, Molnar marshals the most convincing evidence to suggest that Edison schools have not improved student results, have often produced unstable learning environments, and are more costly to run (because of added marketing costs) than the public schools they were meant to replace. Like much of the privatization rhetoric, in other words, Edison has offered a great deal of talk about the benefits of for-profit education without living up to the hype.

That Molnar would offer this conclusion is no surprise, nor is the general tone of the book. With good reasons, Molnar is deeply suspicious of for-profit education and is clearly disdainful of the increasing role corporations have in schools. He presents a raft of solid evidence to support his position, and yet, one will surely read that *School Commercialism* doesn't so much evaluate the impact of the market in public institutions as dismiss such a role from the start. This may be true, but in a book of this length, which is intended to be polemical, perhaps it is enough that Molnar has crafted a strong position. Market values increasingly insinuate themselves into the mainstream of North American schools, and yet they "offer no guidance on matters of justice or fairness, and cannot, therefore, represent the interests of all children" (p. 134). A public education system, on the other hand, is charged with doing just that: representing the interests of all young people so that none are made second-class citizens before they are given the opportunity to be citizens at all.

References

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About the Reviewer

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