

School Commercialism and the Fate of Public Schooling: What's "Good" for America?

School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity. Alex Molnar. New York: Routledge, 2005. 177 pp., \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-415-95132-1.

The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education. Kenneth J. Saltman. New York: Routledge, 2005. 238 pp., \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-415-95046-5.

Reviewed by
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In 1952 General Motors president Charles Erwin Wilson famously pronounced, "What's good for the country is good for General Motors, and what's good for General Motors is good for the country." This outright equation of commercial institutions with national identity, of corporate good with the American good, is the central dynamic explored in both Alex Molnar's *School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity* (2005) and Kenneth J. Saltman's *The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education* (2005). However, two major changes have occurred since Wilson's assertion a half-century ago: Many corporations have grown to unprecedented size, the largest overshadowing the economies of most nations (Lodge & Wilson, 2006); and, as these books demonstrate, the trend has spread from car making to education.

The Deluge

Molnar and Saltman have done a great service to educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners by illuminating the challenge that corporate profit-making presents to contemporary education. Well-crafted and compelling, their books arrive at a time when education is not only under siege,

but all too often submerged by the deluge of commercial values. Although public education was once a relatively protected public good, Molnar and Saltman argue that it is being swept up by globalizing forces, transformed into a commercial enterprise, and reoriented toward a thoroughly integrated relationship with commercial interests. Some historians of education, such as Lawrence Cremin (1961), have argued that economic forces have long influenced education (see, for example, his discussion of the influence of the National Association of Manufacturers on education in 1896; pp. 37–38). However, Molnar and Saltman demonstrate that the subjugation of schooling to market forces has attained unprecedented proportions, and that the capacity of education to perform its democratic responsibility is thereby increasingly threatened.

The books are well paired: Saltman's work is an intensive examination of a specific manifestation of school commercialism, which Molnar describes at a larger level; the former presents the detailed evidence to support the general principles outlined by the latter. The two thinkers share a similar political perspective, as they describe the growing threats to American democracy from commercial forces, including the decline of the public realm and the transformation of students and citizens into consumers. Thus a complementary picture emerges, indicating not only the variety of problems facing contemporary schooling but also their far-reaching social, political, and cultural implications.

Both books are published by Routledge as part of its "Positions: Education, Politics, and Culture" series, edited by Saltman and Ron Scapp. These books join a growing tradition of critical work on the intersection of schooling, power, and cultural reproduction, from Apple's (1979) *Ideology and Curriculum* and Giroux's (1983) *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Ped-*

agogy for the Opposition, to Boyles's (1998) *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School* and Kenway and Wilson's (2001) *Consuming Children: Education–Entertainment–Advertising*. Much of this work can be traced back to Paulo Freire's pedagogy of critical consciousness and Deweyan democratic ideals.

School Commercialism as Miseducative

Alex Molnar is a professor of education policy at Arizona State University, where he directs the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU). The CERU releases annual reports on school commercialism, for-profit education management organizations (EMOs), and market-oriented school reforms, going back more than 10 years. In 1996 Molnar wrote *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools*, one of the first book-length discussions of the subject. In *School Commercialism*, he argues that contemporary American culture and schooling both have become increasingly dominated by the ever-present symbols of commodities and deepening values of consumption.

Molnar brings to bear more than 30 years of analysis of school commercialism, balancing a theoretical inquiry into its central characteristics, a consideration of its key critics, and substantial policy analysis. He describes how schoolchildren are daily exposed to thousands of advertising images and how the educational environment is itself now drawn into this trend as desperate schools turn to corporate advertisers for revenue. He shows that this trend can be observed in the daily life of any student. The ascent of commercialism to a place of political dominance is increasingly apparent in the field of education. He argues that as youth and schools receive more attention from advertisers, school space is being increasingly colonized by the images and logos of commercial discourse.

Early in the book, Molnar discusses the eight categories used to monitor changes in schoolhouse commercialism: sponsorship of programs and activities; agreements giving corporations exclusive rights to sell in schools; incentive programs, such as free pizza for meeting reading goals; appropriation of space, such as advertising in hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms; sponsored educational materials (SEMs) or corporate-sponsored curricula such as the McDonald's nutritional curriculum; electronic marketing, such as Channel One (explored in detail by Saltman); privatization and EMOs (also explored by Saltman); and fundraising practices by corporations, which may, for example, "encourage parents and neighbors to purchase the companies' products so that the labels can be redeemed for rewards" for the schools (p. 26). All categories show marked increases in recent years, and the remainder of the book explores the nature and implications of this trend.

Molnar describes school commercialism as follows:

Today, across the nation and around the world, the ideal of the public school as a pillar of democracy is being transformed by a wave of commercialism. Commercialism is an expression of advanced capitalist culture and a profound threat to democratic civic institutions. Its impact on schools is, at its most basic, to transform the guiding ideal of public schools as centers of learning serving the public good to centers of profit benefiting private interests. Once held to be a public good that could be measured by their contribution to the community's well-being, schools have come to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing and commodities to be bought and sold. They are evaluated largely in terms of how effective they are perceived at preparing workers for corporate employers, and their mission has been transformed conceptually into a "service" that can be delivered by private businesses responding to the profit motive. (p. 16)

Molnar traces the origins of commercialism through the birth of the ad industry to the emergence of modern mass marketing, and contrasts Deweyan democratic ideals with those espoused by the first "adman," Edward Bernays. The author of foundational texts such as *Propaganda* and *The Engineering of Consent*, Bernays argued that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions

of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country" (as quoted by Molnar in *School Commercialism*, p. 76). Molnar shows how this engineering and manipulation not only is hostile to democratic political institutions but functions as an effective mode of social control.

Molnar extends this analysis from a historical and social perspective to the pedagogical, and reveals how commercial pressures are moving in to fill a vacuum left by years of reductions to funding for public education at all levels: "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). Molnar quotes one administrator who acceded to corporate sponsorship because she "got tired of begging for money all the time" (p. 29). But as commercial interests step in to capitalize on the opportunities, such sponsorships will become normalized and schools will increasingly depend on them.

Molnar is perhaps at his most compelling when describing just how deeply advertising runs against Dewey's principles and the ideals of progressive education. Molnar argues that the pedagogy of advertising is "miseducative" because it reduces "freedom of the intellect," to freedom for the "execution of impulses," promoting "pseudo-communities based on consumerism or the uncritical acceptance of a particular policy or point of view" (pp. 82–83). Indeed, Dewey may have recognized this danger himself when he insisted that "the need of the present age is to apprehend the fact that, for better or worse, we are living in a corporate age" (1939, p. 407).

As Molnar shows, school commercialization is inseparable from the more general trend toward the commercialization of childhood. Many marketers argue that they are performing a public service by educating children, and some marketers even suggest that they are a part of a dramatic transformation of the traditional family from an authoritarian parent-centered structure to one more democratically centered around children's real needs and interests (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001).

Near the end of the book, Molnar sets commercialism in the global context of

neoliberalism and privatization and discusses the governing bodies and legal documents that influence it. We see that the trends in the United States are part of a larger, worldwide shift toward school commercialism. Molnar describes a "World Education Market," which "assumes learning and the educative process to be simply one more bundle of commodities, ripe for globalization and profit maximizers" (p. 131). The globalization is led by educational corporations such as Eduventures, whose website announces that, as "a worldwide authority on the education market, [Eduventures serves] a blue-chip client base of executives and senior managers at hundreds of leading educational organizations and technology companies." Thus schooling is construed as a business like any other, one worth \$2 trillion annually.

Molnar is somewhat critical of educators' reactions to these trends: "With notable exceptions, educators' reactions range from tacit acceptance to outright embrace" (p. 121). However, while he criticizes teachers, he doesn't explain what teachers could be doing in their schools and classrooms to address commercialism and corporate relationships. Once teachers become aware of the trend, how can they take action? As Molnar notes, recent successes in limiting corporate influence have been achieved through interventions from parent groups, school boards, or the medical profession (pp. 64–65). Perhaps this is because teachers either are explicitly (and sometimes legally) prohibited from addressing commercialism or are simply overwhelmed by other demands. The book concludes too quickly, with only passing reference to ways of addressing commercialism in education—a great topic for future research.

Edison: A New Form of Allegiance

Early in his book, Molnar makes distinctions between marketing *to* schools, *in* schools, and *of* schools (p. 7). In fact, the three activities seem to follow a logical sequence: Rather than merely sell to, or in, schools, why not run them? The last option is the focus of Kenneth Saltman's *The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education*.

Whereas Molnar has been working on commercialism for more than 30 years, Saltman (DePaul University) is comparatively new on the scene. In the last few years,

however, he has quickly published several books addressing the corporatization, militarization, and privatization of American culture and education, including *Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools—A Threat to Democracy* (2000); *Strange Love: Or How We Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Market* (2002); and *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools* (2003). Since the release of *The Edison Schools*, he has completed a study focusing on the role that American educational corporations are playing in Iraq through funding provided by USAID. Saltman brings insightful analysis to our understanding of troubling developments such as advertising in classrooms and surveillance cameras in hallways—imperatives that are characterized as indicative of larger changes in American schooling and society.

Saltman's book is unique in its focus on one particular manifestation of corporate influence. In *The Edison Schools*, he chronicles in meticulous detail the dramatic rise and fall of America's first EMO, the largest and most ambitious attempt to launch a publicly traded, nationwide, for-profit manager of public schools. Whereas private schools collect tuition from parents, "EMO's seek contracts with school districts or states to run public schools for profit. These companies aim to use tax money to run public schools and extract profits for investors from the money that would otherwise go to pay for smaller class sizes, more books and other supplies, and higher teacher salaries" (p. 2).

Saltman opens the book with an evocative description of the Edison schools, derived from his own firsthand observations, which exemplify the transformation of national reverence into corporate adulation and the replacement of citizens with educational "consumers." Students line up in front of the American flag before classes start, but Saltman notes that "it is not the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America that the students are repeating." Instead, the students repeat a pledge "to themselves and to the Edison Schools Corporation" (p. 2). Saltman's chronicle is made even more compelling by his focus on the central figure behind Edison: Chris Whittle, the founder of both Channel One and Whittle Communications. This grand "edupreneur" is an ambitious "advertising ideaman" (p. 76) whose self-proclaimed

mission is the proliferation of advertisements and whose demonstrated expertise lies in the transformation of public institutions and resources into privately owned for-profit businesses. A frequent, outspoken critic of public schools, Whittle has done little to improve them but instead places himself in a position to profit from their beleaguered condition. His early career of commercializing public space began with forays into health care, such as advertising in doctors' waiting rooms. Saltman shows that the frequent failures of Whittle's controversial for-profit school ventures did little to discourage him but instead led him to launch the Edison schools in 1995.

At present, Edison has 136 schools in 20 states, with a total of 132,000 students. Saltman chose Edison not only because it is the largest and most influential EMO America has ever seen, but because it is considered to be the belle-weather of the EMO movement; Edison is closely followed by the media, academics, parents, and educators seeking to judge the possible success or failure of the EMO movement as a whole. *The Edison Schools* stands as an essential documentation of the trials and tribulations, failures and successes, of this test case. As Saltman writes,

The most pressing issues about the Edison schools involve the role of public schooling in a democracy, and more broadly the meaning of the privatization of the public sector in a democracy. The success or failure of Edison is not so much about the alleged skills or alleged corruption of a group of business people as it is about the fundamental issues of school funding, the purpose of public schools, the role of teachers and administrators, the society's commitment to educating youth to become not merely consumers or disciplined workers but active participants in forging the future with the hope that they will make a better, more just, equal and fair nation and world. (p. 17)

Saltman's chronicle depicts the roles of countless illustrious movers and shakers in American politics, business, and education who came on board for Edison as a result of Whittle's powerful connections. They range from former secretary of education Lamar Alexander and Yale president Benno C. Schmidt Jr. to both Jeb and George W. Bush. The Edison schools' corporate donors range from Time-Warner to The Gap, to IBM and Apple, all seeking access to public

schools and their students to better create—or "brand"—future consumers. Thus corporations that target youth no longer need to do so through advertising alone. As investors, they can gain direct access to school administrators.

Saltman offers several reasons that corporations are interested in schooling. First and most obvious, the schools present a direct opportunity for immediate profit. Second, schools are vast sorting sites, where students are not only held captive but also organized by age and often by income, race, and language. Third, and perhaps most important, schools are sites where cultural values are taught and ideological messages internalized. The book as a whole is a sustained exploration of the consequences of allowing corporations to prioritize commercial values over democratic practices and blur the line between public realms and commercial spheres. Corporations are "remaking the culture of schooling on the corporate model" (p. 10).

In the privatization of our public schools, it is the values of the marketplace and the business world that take over: All too often, efficiency and measurement, cost and competition, come at the expense of quality, inclusion, and equity. For example, the market model is said to empower parents because it allows more "choice." But, in fact, it often empowers some schools more than others; and it empowers schools more than individual consumers, because some privatized schools can choose which students they want to admit. Saltman describes problems in the Edison schools, including charges of racism and cases of exclusion of students who could negatively affect test results.

In addition, as a business, the Edison schools have been less than successful. Saltman writes: "The company did not file tax returns in many states that require them. Whittle faced more than \$10 million in unpaid taxes and penalties" (p. 43). The remedy has been numerous government bailouts and even offers of Edison shares to teachers, including the Florida and California Public Teachers Pension Plan (p. 59), absurdly making the retirements of public school teachers dependent on the relative success of private schools. Fortunately, intensive lobbying prevented such a conflation of public schools with private profit.

In *The Edison Schools*, Saltman demonstrates the problematic implications of the

prevalence of the free market model. When education becomes a business venture, it also becomes a high-stakes gamble, subject to all the risks inherent in economic fluctuations, global economic instabilities, and a highly volatile stock market. Our children are thus placed in the hands of unpredictable, impersonal, and essentially unaccountable economic interests, exposed to the perils of the marketplace. The paradox is that we are expected to celebrate economic freedom, yet embrace increasing corporate clout.

The Canadian Context

The same forces that Molnar and Saltman describe in the United States are also beginning to affect its northern neighbor, a process that has been compellingly described in Heather-Jane Robertson's aptly titled *No More Teachers, No More Books: The Commercialization of Canada's Schools* (1998). The so-called porous border allows for tremendous influence by American commercial forces on Canadian educational systems. For example, Whittle's Channel One expanded into Canada in the 1990s and renamed itself "Youth News Network." Only a tremendous groundswell of national opposition prevented its becoming established. Most cases of the commercialization of education in Canada—from Wal-Mart and Home Depot to Coke and McDonalds—are driven by American corporations. In a recent annual meeting, the Canadian Teachers Federation focused on the commercialization of Canadian schools and on a recent, detailed national survey exploring key empirical indicators of school commercialism; this event seems to confirm that the same trends are at work in Canada as in the United States. Whether or not what's good for GM is good for America, it is rarely good for Canada.

Decreasingly Inquisitive

The works of Molnar and Saltman help to expose this controversial issue, too often concealed through secret contracts and legally

binding nondisclosure clauses—or at times through public indifference. Both authors support their positions with specific examples and numerous citations. But beyond the evidence, it is their larger message that is essential: Rather than abandon education to the marketplace, we should seek collective approaches to strengthen public schools. In a democratic society, it is "we, the people," who can change the schools. Both authors display resounding commitment to, and hope for, the possibilities of public schooling as the foundation for engaged and effective citizenship. Their work constitutes an essential new contribution to the analysis of the growing commercialization of education. For this reason, both books would be useful in graduate or undergraduate courses such as social foundations, cultural studies, curriculum theory, philosophy of education, and educational administration.

A culture that places high value on the acquisition of material goods will be correspondingly limited in its sense of the collective good. Molnar and Saltman ask what pedagogical practices might ensure that politics transforms shared fears into collective engagement. As events reveal that "what's good for General Motors" means laying off thousands, we should be warned of what equating the corporate good with the national good might mean for schools and our children. However, in education the stakes are even higher than loss of profit. The loss of individual potential is at stake, as students become increasingly acquisitive and decreasingly inquisitive. We should remember John Dewey's admonition: "Acquiring is always secondary, and instrumental to the act of inquiring" (1916/1944, p. 57).

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