

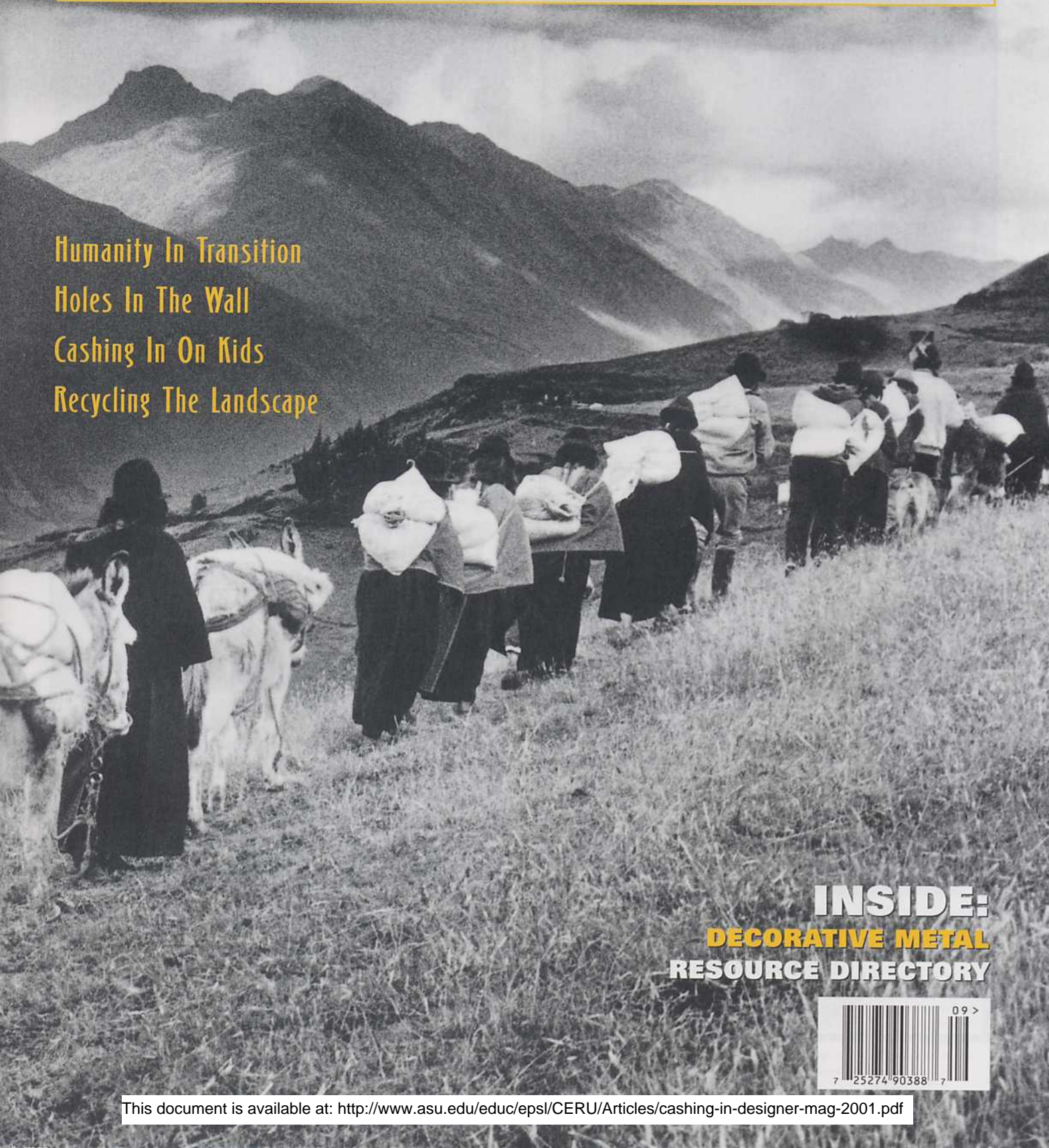
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A JOURNAL *of* THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Humanity In Transition
Holes In The Wall
Cashing In On Kids
Recycling The Landscape



INSIDE:
DECORATIVE METAL
RESOURCE DIRECTORY



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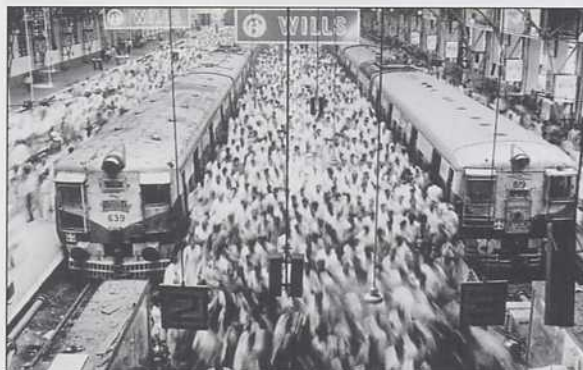
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Cover Photo: With the men away in the cities, the women carry their goods to the market of Chimbote, region of Cimboraço, Ecuador, 1998. (Photo © Sebastião Salgado/AMAZONAS Images)

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CASHING IN ON KIDS

Look around any public school these days and it's not hard to detect the relentless creep of naked commercialism: McDonald's signs on the baseball fence, Coke machines in the hallway, students forced to watch blue-jeans commercials on Channel One. This endless stream of corporate messages is everywhere, and along with promoting sexuality, eating disorders, and inappropriate brand loyalty, it undermines the most fundamental of our democratic institutions: public education.

The schools are now effectively integrated into the marketing machine and long-term planning of most corporations, where the school has become simply another part of corporate sales and public-relations strategy. Corporate messages find their way into the schools through every means imaginable: Web browsers with ads, school voice mail systems with commercialized messages, credit cards tied into school promotions, corporate-sponsored educational materials, television programs with advertisements, the sale of school space to mount advertisements, sponsorship of activities, incentive programs, door-to-door sales promotions, and the naming of facilities, even classrooms.

These efforts stab at the heart of one of the most profound cultural, political, and economic storms of our time, says Alex Molnar, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, director of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education (which is funded by a grant from Consumers Union) and author of *Giving*

Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools. Sixteen years ago, while walking through the exhibition hall at an education convention, he noticed a McDonald's display. He picked up a curriculum that included McDonald's take on nutrition and the environment. Within a month he had boxes of similar corporate-sponsored school materials and has been exploring the subject ever since.

Commercialism in the public schools is nothing new. In 1953, school administrators issued guides warning teachers about uncritical acceptance of corporate-sponsored materials while recommending they not reject such gifts outright. Four years later one researcher found that 97 percent of the teachers interviewed used sponsored materials. In a 1979 report titled *Hustlers in the Classroom*, Sheila Harty expressed shock at the amount of self-serving corporate propaganda, particularly in the areas of nutrition, nuclear power, economics, and the environment, that had made its way into the American classroom. In the last twenty years, amid a political climate marked by industry deregulation, global trade, and public-private partnerships, the doors to American schools have been flung wide to a broad range of commercial interests, including banks, utilities, manufacturers, and food-products producers.

"These are the sorts of background, ambient relationships that people don't think about any more than they do about the air they breathe," Molnar says. "It is nothing new. But it has several different purposes at least."

BY KINGSLEY HAMMETT

these young minds are being saturated all day long with messages for meaningless commercial products.

"This all speaks to a larger cultural issue," Molnar says. "On the one hand you have Britney Spears whose jiggling breasts and bare navel ooze sexuality in a culture of titillation. On the other you have a chorus saying 'Don't fornicate!' We promote soft drinks to children, but are shocked that kids are fat. We decry the ignorance of our children, but we say nothing about the relentless purveying of trivial, self-serving, destructive commercial messages."

There is no such conflict in the Scandinavian countries, Molnar says, where it is prohibited to market to children younger than twelve through

late 1980s, Whittle Communications, now owned by PrimeMedia, has wormed its way into the nations' public schools with a simple deal called Channel One: At no cost they will supply a school with a satellite dish, equipment to receive the satellite feed, television monitors, and a twelve-minute current events program that has two minutes of commercials ... provided the school guarantees that 90 percent of the students view 90 percent of the programs.

Saturating young minds with pitches for junk food, expensive designer clothes, and the importance of plastics and the need for agricultural chemicals helps promote unbridled materialism and negative environmental and economic effects while



any medium – television, billboards, or magazines, never mind schools.

"You simply can't do it," he says, "and Sweden, now the chair of the European Economic Community, is going to try and get the whole community to ban this. I recently learned of a bipartisan group of members of the Maryland state legislature that is trying to draft a law banning marketing to kids in schools."

But too many schools are willing to make a Faustian bargain with commercial interests in order to obtain needed equipment and supplies. Since the

making the term *citizen* virtually synonymous with *consumer* and the possession of objects tantamount to happiness.

The relentless marketing to children raises troubling questions about how we treat our young, Molnar says. The fundamental principle of the so-called free market is people's ability to enter into contracts. If someone goes into a store and buys a pack of gum, that's a contract between a buyer who hands over money and a seller who hands over the gum. The ideology behind contracts requires that the buyer has knowledge and powers equal to

those of the seller, and truly free choice, not just formal choice. A child in school getting bombarded with messages to buy candy and soft drinks fits none of those criteria. He in no way constitutes the independent person of market ideology.

"Yet every once in a while you get someone who says, 'Yeah, but children are so savvy these days,'" he says. "And I'm thinking, OK, then why can't we let them decide whether or not to drink? Why is hard liquor off the table for kids? Why not smoke? And if they are so savvy, why can't four-year-olds vote?"

Molnar believes that the dangerous extension of this pervasive marketing has been a conflation of consumer choice with political choice and freedom. In this country we have moved dangerously close to having our political values and political language completely subsumed under commercial categories. To a certain extent, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton are nothing more than logos for their respective par-

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ties, which are themselves nothing more than marketing tools for the corporations. At the National Governor's Conference or the Republican and Democratic National Conventions they may as well have handed out nylon bowling jackets bearing the names of their corporate sponsors.

"Because if they were a bowling team," he says, "that's exactly what they would be wearing. So to a large extent we have privatized our political system. The influence is enormous, and it's relentless."

School-based marketing is florid excess at its worst. In Molnar's estimation, it is America at its most bizarre.

"This is Elvis in Banlon," he says. "It doesn't get any more flamboyant than this."

On September 23, 1998, according to Molnar's *Second Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, 1997-1999*, John Bushey, the executive director of school leadership in Colorado Springs School District 11, sent a memo to district

principals. He oversees his district's exclusive contract with Coca-Cola and in his memo pointed out that to realize the full benefits of the exclusive sales agreement the students had to consume 70,000 cases of Coke throughout the year. To help this happen Bushey suggested students be allowed to drink Coke products all day long and that vending machines be located where they would be accessible to the most students. He also offered to install additional electrical outlets if necessary and enclosed a list of available products and a calendar of promotional events intended to help advertise them.

Corporations like Coca-Cola are anxious to reach students because they represent a veritable consumption machine, generating more than 36 billion eating and drinking occasions each year that accounts for \$90 billion in direct and indirect sales, according to a report by Channel One. Beyond houses of worship, schools offer one of the last uncluttered advertisement environments in our society, and since students have to be there they represent a captive audience.

If the advertisers are in it for the money, so too are many of the schools, Molnar reports. In 1996-97, Colorado Springs District 11 raised \$140,000 for musical instruments, computers, and staff training by renting space on the side of school buses and school hallways to twenty-nine companies. But the \$4.35 raised per student hardly dented the \$4.8 million the district announced it had to trim from its budget in March of 1999.

But none of that stops schools from trying. Molnar's particular favorite example of schoolhouse commercialism took place two years ago at "Coke in Education Day" at Greenbriar High School in Evans, Georgia. As part of its then largest marketing effort ever, Coca-Cola set out to promote a discount card associated with Coke. It created a school-based aspect of the campaign and promised an award of \$10,000 to one high school in the country whose students came up with the best marketing plan for this card.

"Isn't that remarkable?" Molnar asks. "They get thousands of kids knowing about this card and being engaged in how to sell it to themselves and other kids, and thousands of potential marketing plans, all for \$10,000."

Greenbriar High's winning the contest led to an entire day devoted to promoting Coke in education. Coca-Cola executives flew in from Atlanta. There were lessons in home economics in how to cook with Coca-Cola and lessons in the science lab in analyzing Coke. But the thing that captured the headlines was when the entire student body was marched out to the parking lot and lined up so the freshman formed the letter "C", the sophomores "O", juniors "K", and the seniors "E" for the benefit

of a photographer up in a cherry picker brought in to memorialize the event.

"Just at that moment one of the students unveiled that he was wearing a Pepsi T-shirt," Molnar says, "and they suspended him."

This example cuts so many different ways, he says. How much money did the taxpayers pay to have the entire staff and students subsidize a marketing campaign for Coca-Cola? How did they corrupt their own curriculum to do this? What example did they teach their students about free speech?

"This is an astounding example, and this sort of tawdry theme is repeated over and over in this country in large and small ways. It also points to the extent to which professional educators have lost any sense of moral compunction or ethical bearing. This is a profession that is ethically adrift on this issue."

A database search of general circulation, business, marketing, and education publications shows that the education press is virtually silent on the corporate invasion of schools, whereas other media have covered it extensively.

"Educators are sort of absent-without-leave on this issue," Molnar says. "I wish I could blame it all on administrators at the top. But it simply wouldn't be true. There are teachers who embrace this stuff and see nothing wrong with it and principals who think it's wonderful. They aren't necessarily bad people. But commercial messages invade every relationship and penetrate every institution. So it will always be only a small number of people who stand outside and say, 'We have a problem here.' Most people in any culture are going to be largely unconscious of the cultural air they are breathing."

After privatizing school wall space and privatizing school curricula it's not a great leap to privatizing schools themselves, a movement Molnar finds troubling. Those who support the privatization of public schools do so by claiming that parents want the security and the comfort of having a brand-name school, he says. So if they buy the Edison School they know what they are getting, just as they do when they buy a McDonald's burger.

"The translation of the school itself into a product is to me almost a logical extension of this hyper-marketing in schools," Molnar says. "Once you've obliterated the distinction between public and private, then what's the argument against having for-profit schools that are brand names? You can't even raise the objection."

In the final analysis, the saturation marketing going on within schools ultimately undermines American democracy, he feels. The founders of this country clearly understood that you couldn't defend democracy with military or economic power. The only defense would be education. So

the American public school system throughout our history, with all its failings, shortcomings, and multipurposes, has been essentially a democratic, political institution created to strengthen, preserve, and extend our democracy.

"The problem is, we now live in a time not in which democracy has triumphed," he says, "but in which the market has triumphed. So the market is now busy dissolving democratic institutions, whatever they may be. The schools, as the strongest expression of democratic, civil, and civic ideals in this country, are under attack not because they are performing so poorly, but because the market is undermining all political relationships. There is a very broad and deep political, cultural, and economic transformation under way. It's not inevitable. But the tide is running very strongly in that direction."

One of the overarching appeals of school choice is that it creates the illusion that everyone



can always win all the time. If you go into a grocery store and want Grape-Nuts, for example, you don't get into a fight with someone who wants All-Bran. When everyone gets what they want, there's no conflict. So why not do that with our schools as well and give everyone what they want?

"They actually sell this as if it were possible: an infinite choice with no constraints, no muss, no fuss, no fights," Molnar says. "There is no need then to struggle with each other over the kind of world we want to have. At the surface it appears very appealing. But at the bottom there is no choice; it's a totalitarian world. This is totalitarianism with a smiling face." 🐾

To learn more about the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, please log on to www.schoolcommercialism.org. To obtain a copy of *Giving Kids the Business*, call Westview Press at 303-444-3541.