

School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity by Alex Molnar. New York: Routledge, 2005. 177 pp. ISBN 0-415-95132-1.

Parents send children to public schools with the expectation that foremost on the schoolhouse agenda are the intellectual development of children and the future of our society. While it would be as good as treason to suggest that schooling is completely void of an interest in the welfare of children—society’s future— Alex Molnar’s *School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity* (2005) contends that corporate influences on public education have shifted the priorities of schooling from “promot[ing] the general welfare and strengthen[ing] civil society” to profit seeking (p. 9). Cans of Coke in school cafeterias, corporate-sponsored curriculum in classrooms, and private management of public schools are all exposed in *School Commercialism* as bottom-line initiatives that motivate corporate sponsorship of educational activities and undercut the democratic goals of public education. Drawing from a wide range of sources including: education research, theory, and philosophy; marketing and advertising; and well-documented corporate initiatives in schools, Molnar poses a compelling argument for how corporate interests, mass commercialism, and market-based school reforms are “rendering our society correspondingly less democratic” (p. 81).

Director of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory in the College of Education at Arizona State University at Tempe, Molnar is recognized as one of the leading American critics of commercial activities in schools. Widely published in academic journals, his work has also been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New Republic*, and *Education Week* as well as on National Public Radio, 60 Minutes, and CNN. As part of the Routledge *Positions* series, *School Commercialism* is critically positioned at the center of any debate about who and what should guide the development of school policies and whose interest those policies should advance. Building on Molnar’s earlier work, *Giving Kids the Business* (1996), *School Commercialism* is written to capture the dynamic history of how schools have been made over into an arm of consumer culture. In so doing, Molnar categorizes the types of commercial activity that have developed in public education—*selling to schools*, *selling within schools*, and *selling of schools*. He also situates these phenomena within the context of market-based school policies and reforms that have catapulted to center stage over the last 25 years as a means to promote high academic achievement, specifically the Nation at Risk Report and the No Child Left Behind Act. Molnar holds that in this context schools “once held to be a public good that could be measured by their contribution to a community’s well-being, have come

to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing, and commodities to be bought and sold” (p. 16).

While Molnar suggests that selling textbooks, pencils, paper, and other basic resources to schools has long been a practice and remains fairly harmless, he does not discuss textbook manufacturing, development, and marketing as an element of school commercialism. It is, in his view, corporate “use of schools to sell products, promote their points of view, or address public relations problems” and “proposals such as private school vouchers and the management of public schools by private companies” that have become contradictory to the nature and purposes of schooling (p. 8). Molnar’s analysis here, limited to the influence of commercial advertising and selling, barely scratches the surface of how school commercialism constructs the structure, ideas, and practices of schools, particularly through the hegemonic content and instructional practices distributed by the textbook publishing industry.

Molnar’s suspicion of the convergence of private interests, ideology, and school reform rings crystal clear in his accounts of the growth of Channel One News as “advertising sponsorship of teaching tools” and the evolution of the Edison Project as a private manager of public schools, two significant developments in the expansion of commercial activities in schools (p. 92). Raising questions about Channel One’s prevalence in public schools, Molnar identifies several studies of its 12-minute commercial-packed current events program, launched in 1989, which found the program promotes materialist values, blurs the lines between commercials and news, and minimizes student awareness that commercials sell products. Similarly, Molnar thwarts arguments that the private management model developed by the Edison Project has improved student performance in cities from Philadelphia to Clark County, Nevada with evidence that where schools have taken control back from Edison management student achievement has increased.

Some may argue that in a capitalist society schools should be commercialized. After all, doesn’t popular culture exert strong commercial influences over the lives of our society’s youth? Molnar is, however, clear on this point, emphasizing the particularly noble function that schools have to engender citizenship, common values, and social cohesion within a democratic capitalist society, a function that education historians have traced back to the advent of common schools. The expansion of school commercialism is problematic because neither students nor schools have a choice. Children in schools represent a “captive audience and are asked to believe that what they are being taught is in their best interest” (p. 9). Yet products and ideas marketed in schools ubiquitously reflect the profiteering interests of the market; clearly, marketers are not interested in students as engaged learners, but as engaged consumers. Over the last 20 years, funding cutbacks to education have held schools equally captive,

urging schools to get in bed with corporations because current funding streams—local, state, and federal taxes—do not meet their budgetary needs, and contributing to resource gaps between poor and wealthy schools. School leaders must pander to the terms of “exclusive contracts,” as shown in Molnar’s example of a Colorado Springs school administrator pumping student consumption of Coke products throughout the city’s schools, in order to “receive the full financial benefit” of their agreement. Numerous other dubious examples of corporate sponsorship question whether the purpose of public education is to advance the healthy development of all children or to provide a venue for the socialization of unquestioning consumers.

Dewey would undoubtedly agree with Molnar that “promoting the consumption of goods and services is...profoundly antidemocratic” (p.73). Further, he would support Molnar’s charge that using schools and other public spaces to do so makes advertising the “curriculum of our culture” and allows “every decision we make...to be shaped and influenced by messages bought and paid for by those who would profit from our decisions” (p. 81). Molnar aptly extends Dewey’s (1965) view of traditional schooling as “imposition from above and the outside” to the influence that private interests have both on structuring schools and their practices and on forming the habits and knowledge of students (p. 81). This influence makes freedom synonymous with consumption. Molnar’s examples of field trips to stores such as Toy “R” Us and corporate food-related fundraising activities demonstrate the intimate relationship between children and consumerism that is being nurtured through commercial activities in schools. As purveyors of this ideology, schools thus become the centers for “miseducative experiences” that promote blind consumerism and that put students and society at the “mercy of impulses into whose formation intelligent judgment has not entered.” (p. 82). Where Dewey advocates intelligence, observation, and judgment as the basis of individual and community development, school commercialism creates the illusion of independent thinking and freedom by promoting product choice as the measure of the intelligent consumer. Molnar argues that where corporate market strategies merge with educational objectives “the power of the state is twisted to the service of special interests, the ethical standing of educators is compromised, and the orientation of school is shifted toward miseducative experiences” and schools must be portrayed as failing (p. 86).

By examining how corporate-sponsored activities have become commonplace in the daily activities of schools, Molnar forges a connection between cultural studies and the analysis of educational policy. *School Commercialism* challenges the corruption of democratic principles solicited by corporate influence over schools, a stance for which Molnar’s work is well known. While Molnar directly tells us that these relationships do not increase

either student achievement or school coffers, he does not provide a structural or political analysis of the ways in which institutions, economics, and politics support private profit at the expense of public education. He does, however, suggest that parents, communities, and coalitions do have the power to confront and defeat these influences. Making rigorous scholarship and politically engaged criticism accessible to wide audiences, *School Commercialism* will spark public debate among discerning readers in classrooms, think tanks, policy organizations, advertising offices, and living rooms alike.

References

- Dewey, J. (1965). *Experience and education*. New York: NY, Collier Books.
Molnar, A. (1996). *Giving kids the business: The commercialization of American schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Reviewer

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