A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education, by Richard A. Brosio (New York: P. Lang, 1994.)

Reviewed by Dr. Michael Carbone

The current expansion of the private vision into all aspects of American life is unprecedented as many scholars have been noting for some time. In fact Henry Giroux has proclaimed it the “new public philosophy.” The triumph of the market has been heralded by conservative thinkers and offered up as the solution for many of our most pressing socio/political problems. It was Milton Friedman who first suggested its application to public education and now we are seeing a continued rise in various voucher/charter approaches to provide much needed “improvement” in our nation’s schools. The continued popularity and growth in for-profit companies to run charter schools, schools placed on state distressed lists, and voucher schemes of one sort or another might suggest we are on the verge of privatizing our public school system. Within the current framework of accountability and high stakes testing in our public schools, some might not blame parents for their support of privatization schemes, particularly parents of traditionally underserved populations. As Diane Ravitch reminds us these kids are “somebody’s children.” However, one would be hard pressed to argue that any form of privatization/choice will seriously address much-needed educational reforms for any population of students. In fact, close scrutiny of burgeoning “for profit” companies to manage schools reveals a disturbing story. Steven Wilson’s Advantage Corporation is a case in point. Corporate officers have little-to-no education background and the for-profit schools they set up are run according to the strictest rules of efficiency and cost effectiveness. The pedagogy is limited, routinized and scripted, and some teachers are even recruited from the ranks of retail sales.

This is the educational climate we currently find ourselves in – one on the cusp of the triumph of the private vision and the advent of a “public school industry.” How are we to respond to all of this? Aside from the host of “usual” questions one can ask of any privatization plan, the most pressing one has to do with the future of our common democratic lives, and the larger social issues of equity and justice. What is lost in this final hammer blow to public education? Richard Bosio’s book, A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education helps us to think meaningfully about these issues. In this rather lengthy but authoritative and thorough argument, Brosio discusses the consequences of growing corporate culture and ideology and its ability to colonize almost every aspect of our daily lives and (quite literally) our schools, presenting itself to us as a complete common sense world view. It is this inexorable triumph of the private vision over public values that “rots the pillars of democracy” as Brosio notes. One of the strengths of his text is its scope, integration and reflection of his years of scholarship regarding this acute problem in American democracy, and it is clearly a central problem if our democratic future is to be even minimally preserved.

The text offers a sophisticated analysis of the rise of late capitalist corporate power and just how it has politically managed to saturate our everyday collective lives and our public institutions. His work chronicles in detail the arguments surrounding the triumph of the Conservative Right since the 1970’s. We are left with the idea that corporate power has worked mightily to shape the culture and climate of public schools — and now one might argue even do away with them. What is less certain for Brosio (although not intended) is a clear notion of how schools and those who are in them can regain a level of cultural autonomy to begin effective resistance and critique. But resist we must. If, as Ira Shor has noted, critique and re-imagination are the beginnings of politics then Brosio’s text is a must read for all of us who believe that our common lives matter: human decency and dignity are found in commitments to democracy, social justice and a rich public life.

It is not an easy task to understand how the ideologies and forces of late capitalism have served to inform and structure so much of our cultural life. It is a complex and incomplete process, but it is perhaps the strongest aspect of Brosio’s work. His chapter on “The Consequences of the Capitalist Imperative on Everyday Life” is skillfully organized around his observation that, “our formal society and lived cultures can be described as being most powerfully influenced by two imperatives: capitalism and democracy.” It is the constant dialectical relationship of these two factors which defines much of American politics and consequently the role and shape of major social institutions like our schools. Brosio’s critique of Postmodernism, the “cultural skin of late capitalism” as he names it, is particularly useful and noteworthy as well. He rightly observes that the postmodernist stance of pessimistic ironic detachment concerning the ability to understand things inhibits the construction of liberatory praxis or politics. He flatly states, “many postmodernist thinkers are part of the problem, rather than the solution.” His text is one of the few on the left that actually suggests that
postmodern analysis (beyond their commitment to the politics of inclusion) and frameworks will not yield the sort of vigorous commitment one needs for the reclamation of democratic socio-economic practices.

Lest we think that Brosio leaves us with no hope, his work is a powerful balance between critique and what Henry Giroux has called the language of possibility. Each chapter either explicitly or implicitly suggests through its critical analysis or framework possible democratic ways to act in the face of corporate capitalist ideologies. He is very sensitive to the kind of mass-movement formations needed to advance the democratic imperative. As such he is sensitive to the contributions of the liberatory politics of identity and their relationship to the issues of the larger public sphere. These are delicate negotiations to be sure! This book takes on a big project. The tough intellectual work needed to pierce the current cultural/economic status quo, and the beginnings of building a more democratic vocabulary and framework, are the stuff of Brosio's life work. The text is not a particularly easy read, but for the most part he puts complex ideas into very intelligible language. I would suggest that, in these times of strong private visions and interests, those of us who seek more democratic roles for schools or libraries must read this book. It is comprehensive, well argued, scholarly and — above all — passionate.

Toni Samek’s is an important book that should be required reading in library school, and even as a refresher course for any librarian who needs to remember what librarianship is all about. As Sanford Berman writes in the book’s foreword, “[Samek’s] thoughtful, detailed study can well provide a basis for better understanding where — as a profession — we have been, and where we’re going.” The witty and pointed foreword, incidentally, is well-worth reading as a stand-alone essay.

The prevailing themes in this history of the activist movement in American (primarily United States) librarianship are “professional neutrality” vs. professional and personal social responsibility; access to alternative literature, as provided by libraries, librarians, and non-library radical groups; and American Library Association (ALA) service to libraries vs. to librarians, especially regarding intellectual freedom. The above and other themes introduced by Berman’s foreword, some explored more than others in the body of Samek’s text, lay out the same damned issues facing librarians today. These include [public] libraries’ typical service population, which tends to be the middle class, as evidenced by the preponderance of business materials; the commercialization of libraries and of ALA, where rooms and programs are routinely named after the vendors that sponsor them; intellectual freedom’s narrow focus on individual materials challenges; and collection development that enhances the hype created by publishers.

Samek’s introduction sketches the history of social responsibility in librarianship prior to the years indicated in the book’s title. She gives special attention to the 1930s, the “first verse” of progressive librarianship. Quoted is Jesse Shera, who says of 30s and 60s library activism, “the actors are different, but the script is much the same.” Samek cites the 1939 Library Bill of Rights, “which directed librarians to ‘fairly represent’ materials on ‘all sides of questions on which differences of opinion exist’ and ‘to oppose censorship of books and other reading matter’ because of the ‘race or nationality or the political or religious views of the writers.’” She also provides the social context of the political climate in the sixties. Unfortunately, the introductory chapter gives away too much of the developments chronicled in later chapters and thereby muddies a timeline that is already difficult to record. It is obvious from the thoroughness of the research and