

Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy

By John Buschman. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012).

Reviewed by Peter McDonald

The day a review copy of John Buschman's new book arrived, so too arrived the new *American Libraries* (v.43, #9, p.30), wherein was penned an article by Bertot, Jaeger and Sarin. It was titled "Forbes Folly" where the authors rightfully lament, "Forbes.com published an article in June declaring that a master's degree in ... information science is the worst type of post-graduate degree based on career earning potential."

That may be so, but had Forbes actually bothered to interview any librarians (they didn't) one might wager 99% would reply: "Duh, we didn't become librarians for *earning potential*." But I quibble. Yet today, sadly, when I finally took up the task of writing this review, over the transom arrived an ACRL e-bulletin with the blazing headline, "Beyond Literacy" a new ACRL and Ontario Library Association joint report that touts "the demise of literacy and the rise of other capabilities ... that will effectively and advantageously (sic) displace reading and writing." Really? The author, Michael Ridley, former Chief Librarian and CIO of the University of Guelph, might have spared us this polemic by heeding his own advice by dispensing with writing it altogether.

Even so, these three things share a dubious propensity, a nod to the ubiquity of the marketplace where value is defined in dollars. For one, libraries and the profession of librarianship have long since been commoditized, as the Forbes piece drives home amply. Secondly, prognostications that literacy along with the book are in the final stages of rigor mortis nevertheless fail, blessedly, to materialize, though the siege continues that our future lies surely in the hands of technocrats and their gadgets. And finally, how often today terms like CIO creep into the job portfolios of former library directors as they ascend into the upper echelons of corporate-driven academic management. Libraries in, this

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milieu. do little more apparently than aggregate bits and bytes which, in turn, need information officers to return investment on.

One must, of course, take all of this with a pinch of salt and fortify oneself against the relentless, and largely successful, onslaught within our profession by this trifecta of commercialization, neoliberal capitalism run amok (think Elsevier) and the hegemony of corporate culture creep. The best antidote? Reading John Buschman's new book *Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy* out now by Scarecrow Press.

It is a fine read, and timely. Mr. Buschman, the newly appointed dean of university libraries at Seton Hall, is also the author of *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (2003). In it, Buschman argued that libraries and educational institutions, notably those that are state supported, increasingly gauge their value, not by the inherent benefits they may imbue by nurturing citizens to be well educated or to think for themselves. Rather, to prove their benefits because they are supported by taxation, libraries and schools today are designed largely to prepare the callow mind for the conveyor belts of capitalism and the work force.

In his new book, Buschman builds on his prior work, and posits an important question of addendum. What is it that serves the highest interests of democracy, and can this method of inquiry into participatory citizenship truly serve our 'public sphere' when libraries and classrooms simply reflect a wider neoliberal hegemony? Put another way, if libraries and classrooms increasingly adopt the mantle and language of consumerist capital, do they by extension lose their natural place as guardians of liberty, free inquiry, public discourse, the very quidity we place upon the enrichment of the publica mens as a good for its own sake?

He argues that the link between democracy and the public sphere of our educational institutions (libraries among them) may not at first be obvious, but as a democracy moves from the ideal of a jointly held sense of the public good, to a form of consumerist voting purveyed by an unregulated free-market economy, one might well ask, wither our so-called rights and freedoms as we all are democratized in the market place? Not that democracy is all good, nor voting with our pocketbooks all wrong, but that without a foundational critique of the inherent issues, citizenry becomes synonymous with consumerism. Buschman's is therefore a cautionary tale.

From the outset, Buschman hammers on a familiar theme, that marketing and advertising, and the commercialized language of these domains, already permeate our system of education thoroughly from kindergarten on up. Libraries are no exception as we 'market' our 'services' to our 'clientele' through 'focus groups' and so on. But why should we care? Why not get on the bandwagon and let the marketplace decide what our role is as educators in this society?

Buschman is nothing if not methodical. Through eight dense, often exhaustive, sometimes repetitive, but always insightful chapters he tells us how we got to this impasse, teasing out a set of empirical answers to this inquiry, not least by analyzing the historical connections between our burgeoning democracy with our emerging capitalist principles and the theoretical underpinnings of our institutions of education.

In this, Buschman's chapters have a Socratic quality to them, insofar as they follow a well established didacticism of question and response that in the whole provides a cognitive argument without ever particularly providing a definitive 'answer' to the conundrum of education's proper place in a democracy. It can be slow going in parts, especially his exegesis on the fundamentals of western democracy from Aristotelian views on citizenship, to Jefferson's on democracy, from Tocqueville's young America up through the emergence of modern educational practice. But the long route ultimately is necessary since each theorist examined has obviously built his work on the shoulders of his predecessor till we come to the modern ideals of individualism, community and democratic social order promulgated by the father of American educational experience, John Dewey.

It was perhaps Dewey's failure, as it was also for so many turn of the 19th century American thinkers, like William James and Charles Peirce, in that these foundational educational theorists, while clearly empiricists, failed, or chose not to, recognize, as Buschman puts it, the "growth and dominance of big science, and thus the tension between democracy and ... technology welded to capitalism." Men of this age and class felt it self-evident, and believed without critique, that a well-rounded education would somehow, anyhow iron out the rough spots of the inherent democratic inequalities of industrial expansion which marked the beginnings of corporate dominance in America.

This failure of critique, if you will, paved the way for our current educational system so thoroughly grounded in its complacent corporate-friendly ethos. For example, big science today, as in our major research universities, is too often paid for by corporate interests, which by rights (long before Citizens United) felt they had critical, if not a national role to play in purveying and owning information (e.g. our library resources) and certainly in making good consumers out of us as a workforce (e.g. inoculating our children against a reaction to endless capitalism by spoon-feeding them non-stop advertising from pre-school on).

The author is at his best in the chapters where he tackles the pitfalls, pratfalls and perils of advertising that so permeate our culture, and sadly, our schools (K-16). The rugged pragmatism of a burgeoning America in the mid-nineteenth century through to the market crash of 1929 saw no shortages of the incursion of business into the schoolyard even back then. From *McGuffey Readers* to the sponsorship of scholarships and awards by corporate interests,

the business of educating American kids was itself always largely a business, from chalk boards, to pencils to textbooks on to Channel One TV ubiquity. What Buschman makes clear is that the rise of commercialism and a marketing mentality are everywhere evident in libraries as well.

One cannot do this book justice without emphasizing that Buschman is a scholar who clearly understands the theoretical strands that underpin the evolution of our concepts of democracy, and from there is able to tie these back to a deeper understanding how those democratic concepts infuse our beliefs about education in general, and libraries specifically. The author puts it starkly. When talking of the ‘public sphere’ it is implicit that this includes our schools and libraries: “The public sphere has been “re-feudalized” under neoliberal capitalism’s long reach, and the emotional/experiential spectacles of marketing, advertising and consumption are core to this process.” The apotheosis of this new corporate feudalism, of course, is the happy marketeer’s conflation of the schoolyard and our libraries with that chimerical ‘public sphere’ of the shopping mall. To the neoliberal, the same capitalistic rules apply *a priori* to each.

While this books stands as a deep critique and indictment of neoliberalism’s insidious inroads into how we think about education and the meaning of libraries, it is also a call to arms for librarians to reevaluate some of the implicit assumptions we have grafted from the corporate world into our profession. Buschman’s work, however, could have benefitted from a stronger editorial hand. The paragraphs are often too long and their density sometimes hammers home so many key points in succession its hard to know what the take-away is. Other paragraphs have such a myriad of quotes, often many within a single sentence from multiple sources, it can be truly confusing to get to the end without having to reread the paragraph to grasp the author’s true point of view. Indeed the notes on citation at the ends of each of the eight chapters comprise almost a quarter of the book.

This is not an easy read nor for the faint of heart, but it is nevertheless timely and an important scholarly advancement, perhaps even a bulwark against the inherent complacency of our citizenry toward the inordinate control commercialism, consumerism, capitalism and corporate hegemony have over our lives. One would hope the schoolyard and the civic space of our libraries might be the last haven against this onslaught. As Buschman makes clear, we are sadly, and often blindly, at its alarming epicenter.