

Democracy, Market Solutions, and Educative Institutions

A Perspective on Neoliberalism

Dozens of kids flocked to the Raynham Public Library on Saturday to celebrate the end of this summer's children's reading program. And among the 70 kids who showed up for ice cream and face painting, stood a man in rather large red shoes and face paint of his own. Famed clown and Golden Arches mascot Ronald McDonald joined the celebration after Raynham franchise owner Lou Provenzano donated \$250 in funding for the program.^A

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■ KEYWORDS: Smith, Adam; Advertising; Business models; Citizenship; Consumer society; Conversation; Deliberation; Deliberative process; Economic theory; Education; Human nature; Libraries and democracy; Libraries and society; Neoliberalism.

with [the] rules is HUGE. Interior school bus ads (placed over the seats) expose and influence every student who rides the bus to-and-from school every day. Exterior school bus ads reach and expose not only students and parents, but everyone in every neighborhood (community-wide) as buses circulate to pick up or drop off students each day.^B



(Author's note: this paper is a revised book talk based on my Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism, 2012. Graphics used at the introduction of the talk were included as they are so visually interesting and informative. Page numbers within the book were given for reference back to the original text as appropriate along with additional website locations.)

1. Introduction

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Should these kinds of things in libraries and schools – our public educative institutions in a democracy – bother us, and if so why? I have spent the better part of a decade grappling with this question, and while the answer is “yes,” it is not a simple “yes.” I should probably begin with an explanation of that curious phrase, “educative institutions.” Many types of democratic institutions interact with each other, and there are three basic types: educative – which we’ll talk about today; enabling – like voting, political participation; and elicitive – like juries, school boards, etc. Democracies utilize all of them, and they in turn depend on judgment. The practices in classrooms and of libraries are thus situated here as the function of public educative institutions in a democratic society. As a practical matter, we cannot just assume they are a kind of functional utility of a democracy – that of education and libraries simply sitting alongside the US Government Printing Office, the Postal Service, land-grant universities, and the protections of free speech and a free press (p. 12-13). Thus our concern here is the role of libraries and schools and universities – our educative institutions – in *democratic society*. They are important cultural sites of producing the capacities of sound judgment in a democracy, sorting questions of values, ends, and human flourishing. Also, we can’t address every possible concern about the presence of strongly corporate messages in them. For instance we know that, developmentally, children at a certain stage can’t tell the difference between a television program and the advertisements for toys and food that accompany it. Developmentally kids proceed through these early

stages to the insecurities of adolescents and their need to form identities and fit in – or not. Marketing and advertising – as we know – play on these themes from familiar cartoon characters to consuming products to fit in or conform to an attractive body image (p. 76-84). In turn, Michael Moss has published a book and an exposé on the manipulations of the food industry in the *New York Times Magazine* recently (February 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/magazine/the-extraordinary-science-of-junk-food.html?ref=michaelmoss>). Engineered foods are, in his words, “designed to addict.” Put these together and it is absolutely no surprise that we have problems with eating disorders *and* childhood obesity. These very companies and their products are prime movers in the marketing and advertising in schools (and they are present in libraries too). This is a long-term and serious health concern for our society, but it does not get us quite where my question points: should these practices bother us *as a democracy*, and why?



Far too many of our responses to that question have tended to boil down to a simple and impotent moralism: marketing and advertising encourages consumption; consumption encourages poor behaviors; those poor behaviors are harmful to democratic society; therefore marketing and advertising in our educative institutions is bad. Or, that the market has “invaded” them, markets are organized around private goods, these institutions are public for the common good, therefore these practices are bad for them, public purposes and for democracy. One can easily envision such arguments made before a cash-strapped board worried about finances. It would be lauded as a fine sentiment and then ignored as another policy for more commercialization of the library or school or university is adopted. In answering our question, we must first recognize that there was no “golden age” of American public libraries or education essentially free of business interests and advertising materials. It simply never existed. 122

million copies of the *McGuffey Readers* were sold for use in American schools from 1836 to 1920, and their essential curricular lessons were in adapting to industrial society, its products and disparities in wealth. Free samples of tooth paste, soap and prepared breakfast food were common in schools by the late 19th and early 20th century, and “supplementary” materials were provided early on in areas of interest to businesses. Early media were heavily promoted both as industries and products within the schools and as new and better forms of teaching: Edison predicted in 1922 that movies would replace books, and it was later predicted elsewhere that radio would replace teachers. Libraries followed in the larger wake of developments in education despite the 1902 claim by an administrator that the library “offers no gain to the mercantile adventurer. [T]here are few allurements for money” (http://www.archive.org/stream/whydoweneedpubli00ameriala/whydoweneedpubli00ameriala_djvu.txt). Libraries have been entangled with business practices and corporate largesse – and their influences – from Andrew Carnegie through Bill Gates. The early 20th century also saw business-like marketing practices such as billboards and business partnerships to promote library popularity, and the gradual emergence of information as a commodity and the transition to the “new” economy encouraged these practices (p. 37-54). We now see mail from the American Library Association endorsing the purchase of Geico Insurance as well as Association sponsorships and partnerships with food and electronics companies and a cable television network. And, from my illustrations we see individual libraries have fully embraced corporate sponsorships and offered positive marketing exposure in the affiliation as well. McDonalds now equates with children’s reading programs in Raynham Public Library – at least to the kids.

2. Neoliberalism

So what has changed? What makes these things different now and a challenge to democracy? I contend – along with many others – that we crossed a Rubicon of sorts in the 1980s. Thirty years ago the prestige of private enterprise was sky high. “The 1980s were not a time to say no to business” for educative institutions as Alex Molnar has observed, and administrators “were desperate to prove their willingness to cooperate” – and they still are (p. 43). A significant part of that cooperation was an expansion of the practice of privatization – like selling off public assets, outsourcing, charging for services, and encouraging private sector competition with public functions. The effect was to turn business and corporate support on its head: instead of looking to assist or improve these educative institutions for society (even if only by modeling business-like efficiencies or contributing expertise), they looked to develop markets out of them. We now expect them to behave like businesses. Recruiting and fundraising are cases of

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both developing markets and creating the conditions of competitive success, and services like meeting rooms or videoconferencing are self-supported by being marketed internally: often a client must budget and pay for this out of institutional funds. It is a logical next step to view children, students, or library users themselves – already gathered together – as a ready-made market for services and products to be marketed to them *in situ*. These practices have grown steadily over the years so that they have become naturalized; we take them for granted, but they are also quite novel (p.42-46).

This history is *much* more complicated than this overview of course – corporate philanthropy itself is a cottage industry of scholarship examining motives and outcomes. But the basic trajectory has led to a sea change: neoliberalism. There was a liberalism before neoliberalism. A gloss on Adam Smith provides the common ideas:

[I]ndividual self-interest is the primary instrument of social progress. Since men are the best judges...of their own particular needs and capacities, it follows that the most rational use of human and material resources will occur automatically if people are allowed to follow their natural bent under conditions of free competition... If men are forcibly prevented from doing as they wish, their natural inventiveness and enterprise will be stifled; if these forces are liberated, there is bound to be a rapid and progressive improvement in the conditions of human existence (p. 55).

Now, as Henry Giroux put it, the rationality of markets has become “both the referent and the ideal for change” for libraries and schools and universities, and “the basis for new relationships” between these institutions, society, and the economy (p. 43). This is the essence of neoliberalism: a set of interlocking propositions which assert that our well-being is best realized almost exclusively by maximizing self-interest, *entrepreneurial* (vs. political) freedom and protecting property rights, individual liberty and free markets and trade. From Adam Smith’s assertion that “the propensity to truck, barter



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and exchange one thing for another is common to all men” (<http://geolib.com/smith.adam/won1-02.html>) forward, the assertion is that economic and market relationships are the core to human nature and the definition of rational behavior. Margaret Thatcher’s famous acronym TINA put it succinctly: There Is No Alternative. Superficially, neoliberalism has its attractions: politically, by limiting coercive economic power (taxation) and freeing markets, we protect freedoms. Neoliberalism is, however, highly reductive: a human is *only homo oeconomicus* with “no feeling of affection for his fellow man,” wishing only “to see in front of him...other economic agents” as Ardan put it (<http://tinyurl.com/bu7yugw>). *Everything* is a market, and/or conducted by the rules of economics: human organs, relationships, religion, and libraries and schools – our educative institutions. For instance, a neoliberal view of children in foster care casts them as naturally interested in making life choices and thus possessing the wherewithal to negotiate the foster care system and living arrangements with host families. Absent are notions of the emotional needs of a still developing child or adolescent, or the concern, care, and motivation of families who reach out and take in these children. By monetizing – and that’s what markets do – *everything*, neoliberalism leaves us with the anomalous situation we noted at the beginning: we market high-calorie/low-nutrition foods to captive audiences

of children in libraries and schools, then we market diets or counseling to them for those who, as a result of consuming these foods, can't measure up to the body image pushed out in the advertising they're saturated with. The market is the solution to the problems the market creates within neoliberalism, and these patterns have implications for the health of our democratic political life, as I will discuss (p. 54-59).

3. Thinking About Democracy & Neoliberalism in Our Educative Institutions

So, if neoliberalism is posited as the way we are to conduct our lives and shape our institutions, and there is a consequent strong market presence within our educative institutions, then what does neoliberalism do inside them that is damaging to democracy? Political theory – specifically democratic theory – helps us to think about this question and provides some insights. I will briefly discuss three of them.

First: What Public Educative Institutions Are For

It is easy to demonstrate that the language used to describe our educative institutions and their purposes is different now than seventy-five or even fifty years ago: it is much more closely aligned to neoliberal values now. In 1848 Horace Mann wrote that “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men” (www.tncrimlaw.com/civil_bible/horace_mann.htm) and core to the health of democracy. 135 years later – and 30 years ago – the authors of *A Nation at Risk* wrote in quite a different spirit: “We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors... America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer” – ideas that still hold strong sway (p. 7). Early democratic theory reminds us just how reductive and novel this is: even Adam Smith wrote that the “expense of the institutions for education is...beneficial to the whole society, and may, therefore, without injustice, be defrayed by the general contribution of the whole society” (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/wealth-of-nations/book05/ch01d.htm>). What is that benefit? Jefferson’s explanation still resounds: the people “should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens...without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance”; and, “that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county...” (p. 25-27). In other words, our public educative institutions were not *primarily* founded to form markets or even promote prosperity – though that *was* part of the equation. They were started in the interests of the health

and functioning of democracy. Tocqueville was struck by this almost as soon as he touched American *terra firma* in 1831: “no one seems to doubt” that a democratic republic is a natural and good thing he wrote, therefore

enlightenment must be diffused widely among the people, that one cannot enlighten the people too much. You know how many times in France we have been anxious...to know if it is to be desirable or fearful for education to penetrate through all the ranks of society. This question, which is so difficult for France...does not even seem to present itself here... [T]o them even stating the question had something shocking and absurd about it... [T]hey do not seem to suspect that there is some education that can never be shared by the masses (p. 117).

We grant tax-exempt status even to private institutions like Seton Hall or the Redwood Library and Athenæum in Newport, R.I. because of the *public* good they do in the interests and health of democracy. Early democratic theory gives us a perspective on our libraries and schools under neoliberalism, providing our first insight: subtlety, their purposes have changed; citizenship, human flourishing, democratic rights, the goal of fair and expanded participation in community and political life are no longer at the rhetorical fore in our educative institutions under the influences of neoliberalism.

Second: Small Things Do Matter

Tocqueville again provides another novel insight: citizens learn democratic habits “from infancy,” it could “even be traced in the schools, where the children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined. The same spirit pervades every act of social life” (p. 118). In pragmatic terms, Tocqueville tells us that the details of how we conduct daily life in libraries and schools and universities effects society. It is important. Our neoliberal market practices inside them are *not* meaningless or harmless drops in the bucket or a mere vocabulary change: they send a message about what we value, the content of democracy and our expectation of the citizen. We educate also by how we structure and fund and govern our educative institutions (p. 115-121). Modern democratic theory draws some specific lessons. Michael Sandel’s formulation sums up one of the primary points: “we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone” (p. 126). When they function well our educative institutions instantiate and form a kind of *community* – a good in common. Community in turn depends on and functions through trust, cooperation and mutual dependence. We all agree to drive on the right side of the road and that red means stop in the interests of everyone’s safety, including our own. These common virtues are the very building blocks of democracy: we must trust

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that our vote counts, the position that prevails in elections is the one with the most votes for governing to be legitimate, and we agree to renew the questions locally, regionally and nationally on the Tuesday after the first Monday every November. And we must be invested in and trust and shape our institutions. It is these very things that neoliberalism inside them erodes: the argument behind the rule to forbid the Chuck-E-Cheese game on a device during class time for the sake of the reading group or the common learning environment of a classroom is undercut by the practice of advertising to a captive audience of kids in the reading program or students on a bus or in the classroom itself. What we are saying in this instance is that advertising which benefits the finances of the institution is fine. As it was put recently by an area superintendent, “When you’re going into Newark Airport, you fly right over our high school, why not see if Ralph Lauren or Donald Trump would like to paint an ad there?” (http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2013/03/schools_look_at_advertising_to.html) But it is somehow not when we don’t want it to be fine. That can’t help but be confusing to kids: the collective and cooperative educational goals of the classroom are set aside during the time the school wants advertising to be seen in the classroom, but oddly (to the child) seems to be the reason not to enjoy the Chuck-E-Cheese game when it would otherwise be allowed. Further, libraries themselves are an instantiated good in common – a shared resource and often a focus of community. But user-driven selection in libraries often mimics consumer choice in the ways it is often structured – like individually selecting goods in a mall. Both of these practices privilege market preference – the neoliberal attribute of self-interest exploiting a common resource – in damaging ways. Habermas notes that advertising and enshrining self-interest



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define a “grammar of systematically distorted communication...of dissociated symbols and suppressed motives” (p. 162). That is, our educative institutions are the site of working out the meaning – the “grammar” in his terms – of terms as learning, autonomy, integrity, and education which are important to forming political concepts . It is difficult to see how these building blocks and of trust, interdependence and community are fostered in the very institutions meant to foster them by adopting these kinds of neoliberal practices. A student quoted in a recent *New York Times* editorial summed it up when she reflected on the rewards of an obsessive focus on individual improvement: “Time not spent investing in yourself carries an opportunity cost, rendering you at a competitive disadvantage as compared to others who maintained the priority of self” (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/opinion/brooks-the-empirical-kids.html?_r=0).

Third: The Ability to Deliberate and Quality of Deliberation

Put most simply, a version of democratic theory tells us that modern democracy began in talk – debate about whether or not this or that policy

was a good idea or good for business in the public sphere as Habermas has it. Debate means exchange and challenging of ideas, reasons for and against and the primacy of the better argument and evidence. It also had a critical cast. Soon under the influence of talk and deliberation, arbitrary monarchical decisions seemed, well, arbitrary, not a legitimate use of power, and they were critiqued. Modern democratic political ideas were born out of this process, and the process was not only verbal, it was quite literate and literary – implicating our future educative institutions. Furthermore, the *legitimate* democratic exercise of power means that the reasons for a policy are public; they are not secret. That is, they are openly debated on fair grounds – all points of view are expressed – and the result is arrived at through this open process through the force of the better argument, written about and reported and interpreted for the broader public that will be affected by the decision and will reflect on that come election time. That is an ideal rarely achieved, but nonetheless it is what shapes our expectations of democratic practices and institutions – it is *why* the woman who helped stop the 2011 Tucson shooting which killed six and wounded Congresswoman Giffords yelled “shame” from the Senate galleries when background checks were filibustered (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/04/senate-rejects-gun-background-check-compromise>). Even glimmers of its eventual coming-to-pass gives energy and promise to the inevitable ugly processes of logrolling and other features of actual democracy in action. In turn, our educative institutions are meant to shape people who can speak and listen to one another – to deliberate themselves: “embodied in smaller groupings, which cohere because people talk to each other” as Eliasoph puts it (<http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/events/eliasoph.htm>). Neoliberalism in our educative institutions undercuts deliberation in a number of ways. First, as Neil Postman has noted, the presence of advertising in an educative setting undercuts the building blocks of literacy, reason, and thought that we are trying to teach: a commercial is not a proposition or testable; rather, it is a drama of handsome people selling, buying, and eating things, ecstatic in their good fortune. Advertising is a discourse “immune to truth,” facts and reasoning “are as scarce as unattractive people” as he puts it (p. 74). Habermas calls this systematically distorted communication – that which could not maintain its validity if subjected to rational exchange and inquiry (p. 162). We can see this in our current political discourse, primarily in the form of advertising: it fits Habermas’s description of a stylized show and a ritualized exchange of symbols essentially devoid of deliberative political content. Neoliberalism’s influence in our educative institutions – advertising in the classroom most especially – only exacerbates this situation in the young. It is just these areas where the stakes for money and power are not high that are important foundational arenas for democratic culture – the setting of the “grammar” of everyday life and its terminology and meaning as noted earlier. Second, we should be able to guide libraries and schools – they are local institutions after all – in democratic

ways through open deliberation. It is, as Parental put it, the “moral quality of the arguing—not of the arguments—which occurs” that is so valuable within deliberative democratic theory (p. 151). A quick look at one’s local newspaper reveals that too frequently fails. School and library and university boards and administrations frequently fall out over contentious issues – recent events at Rutgers are a good local example. This again replicates on a local or regional level our current national deliberative gridlock. Third and related, we know that the dominant neoliberal model of looking at and guiding our educative institutions reifies the market. In other words, where money goes and where it comes from is the primary “voice” in our neoliberal-influenced institutions, and nationally that has had damaging effects. The Supreme Court’s steady forty year process of privileging of commercial speech – essentially advertising – has culminated in the *Citizens United* decision, but was preceded by decisions like *Lorillard* that struck down a ban on advertising of cigarettes near schools and playgrounds in the name of the public’s right to “hear” that commercial “voice” and its “argument” and “evidence.” Corporations are persons, now with full First Amendment protections of their speech – conducted through the steering media of money. It is no leap of imagination to see our local institutional practices in libraries and classrooms (like those discussed here) as the ultimate penetration of this neoliberal principle and its baseline undermining democratic culture – essentially a right to “speak” – that is, advertise – in our classrooms and libraries at all levels and of all types (p. 173-188).

4. Conclusion

Are we then in a pessimistic dead end? There is no such thing as total hegemony – the horrific historical examples of Nazi Germany and the totalitarianism of the former Soviet Union tell us that. Neoliberalism is no different: it strongly tends to characterize contemporary institutional culture and expectations of and within our educative institutions, but it does not totally define them or erase their history or define *our* purposes for them. But democratic theory again offers us some further insights that point ways forward. The first is that democracy is not *a* thing (a bicameral legislature with a chief executive elected every four years and a supreme court layered over federalism for instance). There are many democracies and democratic practices just as there are many democratic theories that shed light on their similarities and differences. This leads us to a second insight. Formal functioning of democratic institutions can be quite undemocratic – the Electoral College or gerrymandered Congressional districts or closed school or library board sessions are just a few examples. Informed participation and citizen and media vigilance concerning these formal arenas *are* important, but Mark Warren points us in another direction as well: toward democratizing *society*; arenas like the on-the-ground institutions under discussion here (p. 187). That, as

Tocqueville noted long ago, is where democracy is nourished and replicated. How do we do that? This brings us to the third point: we enable democratic voice – people’s genuine input in shaping and guiding our/their institutions that affect them directly. This is not merely hortatory either. Nina Eliasoph found a couple of interesting things in her research. Though people didn’t think of their conversations around these institutions and their engagement with them in political terms, she found their talk had real political content. Any time you speak of shaping and helping children or students or library users and worry about the world they inhabit, you are talking politically at a high level about our society, our environment and our politics. Also, Eliasoph found that *formal* institutional politics and input were not where the action was. It was in enabling this kind of talk – democratic voice. And, very often the people participating in and helping to guide those institutions – bureaucrats and administrators like me and many of us – recognized this content and were quite committed to enabling and enacting it (p. 144). (Ironic given the rhetoric we use about bureaucrats, isn’t it?) Whitney Maxi, a community organizer in the Liberty City section of Miami summed up these points and put a human face on them in an interview on the American Dream. The crash of 2008 was just a “deepening of the devastation” there she said. “The immediate goal” is to “create systems that are more humanizing to be in and having a say in what resources come in and out of the community. If there is an American Dream in Liberty City, it’s having a voice that’s heard and recognized as the authority for their area” (<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/wealth-poverty/next-america/american-dream-liberty-city-miami>). If I had to sum up the point of my research in broad terms, I would say the takeaway is that democratic theory points out to us that our goal may be modest, but it is crucially important: to see to our institutions’ support and fostering of democratic capacities in the young and in our current generations of citizens. Getting to that point and thinking it through in a legitimate way has been a complex process, and enacting it is not simple, but I believe it is crucially important in our work.

NOTES

- A. <http://www.enterpriseneews.com/business/x1510867399/Raynham-Library-embraces-corporate-sponsorship-as-McDonald-s-funds-kids-program>
- B. http://www.busads.com/miscads_schoolbus.htm