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# NOT MUCH INTELLECTUAL COLLATERAL

by Kevin Kosar

*Collateral Damage, Corporatizing Public Schools, A Threat to Democracy*

by Kenneth J. Saltman

Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 125, 2000

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Despite coming from an academic publisher, *Collateral Damage* is, as its title indicates, anything but dry and scholarly. The endnotes after each chapter tend to be modest in number and often cite the same article numerous times, giving the impression that Saltman either does not know his literature particularly well or is purposely avoiding contrary views. Being charitable, one might venture that being a young professor of "social and cultural studies" at DePaul University who is well read in Marxist and radical theorists like Frederic Jameson and Noam Chomsky, Saltman is just a little out of his field of strength. This does not, though, mean that Saltman has nothing of value to say.

Saltman's most important contribution is calling to light recent corporate influence on public schooling. The private sector has, of course, long taken an interest in the public schools and assuredly some forms of corporate involvement are salutary. Companies that buy student athletes uniforms or pay the travel expenses of the debate team ought to be lauded. I have a relative who as part of a company charity program spent time reading to under-privileged children.

However, it seems that of late businesses have begun to be more brazen and now look upon pupils in classrooms as captive markets for marketing. Saltman mentions some particularly dreadful inci-

dents, such as the case of a student being disciplined for wearing a Pepsi t-shirt on "Coke Day" at his school. He also directs our attention toward the efforts of KIII's Channel One and ZapMe! to donate their way into public schools in exchange for the right to advertise products to students. I myself know someone who worked for a major record company and confessed that it was going to great lengths to capitalize on the student market. Free notebooks, pens, and coupons were donated to students, all of which carried the company's logo and advertised recently released compact discs. She, being of a leftist bent, admitted that being part of this troubled her conscience, but salved her pain a bit by saying it was part of the business. In this way, *Collateral Damage* is useful. It puts upsetting incidents in front of one's eyes. Awakened to what is happening, parents and citizens can raise their voices either for or against this sort of behavior by big businesses.

*Collateral Damage* is also helpful insofar as it calls attention to the recent shift in the dialog about schooling. Saltman is correct — increasingly the policy conversations tend to frame the matter in terms of efficiency, accountability and results. There does seem to be less talk about the greater goals of education, e.g., the crafting of a national identity and shared culture, the development of good citizens. More and more, the public dialogue focuses on questions of institutional capa-

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*Kevin Kosar is a Lecturer at the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Administration, New York University and Senior Editor of The Texas Education Review.*

bility: can public schools deliver an education? Can they do so efficiently? However, to assert that the language of the market has triumphed over all other education policy talk is a wild overstatement. Plenty of new books have appeared in recent years on education and citizenship and the subject of education and its role in fostering civil society has been particularly hot.

Unfortunately, though, the value of *Collateral Damage* ends there. Most of this slim volume is little more than a rant against corporations, the military and government plutocracy. As Saltman sees it, "democracy is under siege." He therefore sets himself two tasks: first, to help teachers see "the rapid privatization of public education" and to recognize that this is part of a broader assault on the public sphere by big capital; second, to arm teachers and "cultural workers" (whatever they might be) with "a public language and framework in which to critique privatization." Saltman fails terribly at both.

Speaking to the latter objective, Saltman preaches to the converted. His arguments tend to be inflammatory, his citations of research are few and one-sided, and his tone is utter, righteous outrage. Those who think differently are dismissed with disdain. This makes the rhetorical weapons he offers to teachers both ridiculous and ludicrous, much like the plastic cutlass wielded by the absurd Ignatius J. O'Reilly against the depraved world in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

What ought teachers say to those who think that parents should have the right to choose the schools their children attend? According to Saltman, they should inform parents that private schools are no better than public schools, that "significant evidence suggests that precisely the opposite is true." To support this fantastic assertion, Saltman cites just one study of privatization in the 1970s, leaving one to wonder once again — is he out of his element or just dishonest?

And how should teachers respond to the push for charter schools? Again, deny that charter schools are any better than public schools. Saltman hammers Chester E. Finn, Jr., Louann A. Bierlein, and Bruno V. Manno (erroneously called Manno Bruno) over a 1996 *Brookings Review* article in which they praise charter schools. Finn et. al. perceived charter schools as "among the fastest-moving and most promising reform

strategies in American public education" with diverse learning programs and "excellent" teachers. Saltman disagrees. He construes charter schools as the equivalent of educational plantations foisted off on the poor and illogically reasons that charter schools tend to crop up in poor communities because "wealthy communities would not stand for such shoddy public schools."

Well, then what about a modest, inexpensive, common-sensical reform such as requiring all students to wear school uniforms? Thinking back to my own days in school, I and many others were singled out for ridicule by more affluent students because we did not wear the right shoes or clothing. It was painful and humiliating. In retrospect I wish that all students had been required to wear uniforms. It would have cut down greatly on the tormenting and saved parents a lot of money on back to school shopping. Sorry — no dice, says Saltman. Whereas I and many parents think uniforms reduce distinctions between rich and poor, Saltman instructs us that uniforms are a tool of the overclass for quashing individualism and inculcating militarism and excessive obedience into the young. Apparently we are deluded, suffering from "false consciousness" (which would explain Saltman's repeated insistence that this or that incident "must be viewed as" part of a greater conspiracy).

Speaking of greater conspiracies, we come to Saltman's first task, which is to convince readers that school privatization is part of a greater assault of private capital on the public sphere. According to Saltman, who leans on Paul Starr, there are "three visions of privatization: economic, cultural, and neoconservative." The cultural vision seeks to devolve power from government to families, churches and non-profits organizations. Neoconservative privatization favors diverting citizen demands away from government providers to a variety of private sources for the purpose of reducing "government overload." Though not well fleshed out, this form of privatization appears to be concerned with the gradual accretion of state power vis-a-vis citizens and governmental efficiency. But these two forms of privatization have been indubitably "eclipsed" by economic privatization. This way of thinking

"does not view privatization as a means to a greater social good but rather views privatization

as an optimal social arrangement itself...privatization is both the greater social goal and the means to it. Heightened individualism, greater personal freedom, and more unfettered economic opportunity are the 'social goods' that privatization seeks to further."

Saltman does not substantiate his claim that economic privatization has recently outshone the cultural and neoconservative variants. Indeed, one might well point to the devolutionary aspects of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act and the recent Bush faith-based policy initiative to argue that cultural privatization remains a political and policy force.

But let us grant Saltman this claim and suppose that dialogically, public policy talk increasingly frames matters in the vernacular of microeconomics. How did this occur? One might suggest that it was only a matter of time. Much of the history of American education policy was an effort to expand equal educational opportunity to all children. Up until about fifty years ago, that meant seeing that there were enough schools for all children to attend, providing them with transportation to and from school, books, nutrition, and other resources. Thereafter policymakers moved to deliver educational services to children who were "underserved" by the schools — the handicapped, non-English speakers, and those who extreme poverty had left ill equipped to learn. Having made great but incomplete inroads on these fronts, policymakers then turned their efforts away from merely expanding physical resources and services and toward assessing and improving their quality.

And there might be another thesis that helps explain the increased influence of economic privatization in education policy talk. Anyone who has much studied the history of public policy making likely recognizes that scholars and policymakers are susceptible to intellectual fads. In the first quarter of the twentieth-century, Dewey and progressivism became all the rage in academic educational circles. From there it filtered out to the schools and state departments of education. By the 1950s microeconomic and mathematical methods of analyzing policy became popular in universities and crept out into government. One need only recall Robert McNamara and his fellow government servants' failed efforts to mathematically

calculate how much damage the North Vietnamese could stand before capitulating. And who can forget the deluge of studies and conferences on the relationship between academic under-achievement among inner-city children and "cultural deprivation" in the late 1950s and 1960s? The list goes on and the point is clear — new methodologies and burning policy questions come and go as does their power to influence policymakers. In which case, one might wonder, why worry? New arguments re-framing questions of schooling and public policy will emerge and the influence of economic privatization will recede to more modest levels.

Yet, Saltman does not see things this way. Policy debates are not a sort of Hegelian dialectic of argument, counter argument and progression toward a wiser understanding. Instead, we have reached the policy equivalent of the end of days in education policy.

"The triumph of market language imposes a singular vision of the future and a singular sea of values- namely, faith in capitalism. When this happens, there is nothing left to discuss. Authority become unquestionable, and dissent, the lifeblood of democracy, appears as disruption and threat."

The Beast is come. However, in secular Leninist fashion, the Godly won't be teleported from Armageddon to Heaven by the Rapture. Rather, the proletariat, led by a vanguard of school teachers, must take to the ramparts. Economic privatization is not an egghead fad; it is a dark plot. Conservatives and the dark forces of big capital have insidiously permeated the American language with their nomenclature and are using it to psychically steal away the public sphere from the people. Big capital is enlisting the military and is plundering "nature, freedom and basic human rights in the pursuit of profit." And they are making war against the public schools, America's bastion of freedom and secular church.

This conspiratorial view of reality, of course, leads Saltman to see all phenomena in the context of this greater systemic conflict. The results are predictably silly: real-life television shows like COPS and metal detectors in schools are said to be the devices of big capital seeking to reduce us all to obedient workers. Even liberal school reform ideas are pilloried. For example, Christo-

pher Jencks, Joseph P. Viteritti and others have suggested that vouchers be given to poor and minority children who are trapped in failing schools. This is blatantly redistributive, and that conservatives have got behind this proposal should evoke jubilation from the Left. But to Saltman, vouchers for the poor are just wrong. Giving the poor a ticket out of failing schools is simply incompatible with "genuine democracy":

"The first major problem with liberal voucher plans is that while they do concern pluralism, they do not take seriously power sharing by different groups. Their overreliance on a strong sense of the common good renders an inability to comprehend such issues as who has the power to set economic and cultural agendas. In other words, liberal voucher plans seek to redress inequalities but not address or change the underlying structures that produce these inequalities. Namely, institutions based in capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism need to be replaced with more egalitarian structures that facilitate power sharing, not merely recognition of difference through tokenism or the willingness to include the excluded in dominant institutions."

The system is controlled by the rich and powerful and is rigged against the non-rich and non-white. If we are to achieve true democracy, then this system must be smashed. And how is this to be done? Violent revolution? Saltman does not enumerate what means are acceptable. He does, however, see the public schools as a powerful weapon in the war.

Saltman thinks schools should help better democracy. This seems innocuous enough. But what does he mean by this? It is not clear. Saltman describes democratization as "the extension of equal social relations throughout all sphere of society." That is murky enough, but trying to imagine how this would play out in policy is mind-boggling. Do we equalize all wealth? Do we turn all corporations into citizen owned and operated public utilities? What does it take to make the "structures" no longer dominant? And should we shackle the media because they tend, in Saltman's opinion, to foster perceptions that the public schools are run by pedophiles and predatory teachers? Who knows- we are given only fuzzy prescriptions. Thus, better democracy

means the

"redistribution of decision-making power and resources from the small number of hands they are currently concentrated in to the bulk of the population. It also involves the democratization of the access to media production and the ending of commercial monopolies on the tools of meaning making."

Saltman is a little (just a little) clearer on the way to better public schools. Not surprisingly, policymakers and citizens alike must face up to the fact that schools are "resource starved." Ignoring the work of Erik Hanushek and others, Saltman insists that bad educational results are the result of insufficient funding. Moreover, the very mission of the schools needs to be reconceived. We must "rethink [of] public education as part of a broader struggle for education as a vital public sphere committed to radically egalitarian and yet diverse social transformations." Students should be taught "to transform a system that divides haves from have-nots and divides whites from non-whites."

One might imagine that fostering diversity of thought and values, something that Saltman emphasizes, might be helped by radically shaking up the current school system, structurally. If government is the all too often tool of capitalists, then why not reduce government influence over the public schools by advocating vouchers for all children? Why not let more diverse groups run schools? Why insist that those who teach in the schools have credentials from cloistered education schools that tend to "privilege" certain values? In short, why hold that the only possible public schools are those that are run by unions and engulfed in a colossal tangle of red tape and are unaccountable to the people? Saltman admits that the

"history of public schooling in America is rife with highly undemocratic traditions such as racism, sexism, and classism; adherence to cultural canons at odds with difference; and the blind support of state institutions that have failed in many regards to live up to their theoretically democratic commitments."

Yet, Saltman votes for the structural status quo. He crosses his fingers and hopes that the public

schools will shape up and do the right thing. Saltman calls for more money for schools and for teachers to “recognize their role as public intellectuals.” He does not mean that teachers should take up reading the *New York Review of Books*, *Lingua Franca*, *Le Monde* and writing heavy articles. Instead, teachers ought to use their positions to reshape children’s politics, teaching them to block out the mass media’s messages, which “advocate oppression and hierarchical social relations as well as unquestioned knowledge and authority.”

This is not education policy; this is Saul Alinsky all over again — read my book, get active, and fight the power — *Rules for Radicals... in the Pub-*

*lic Schools*. We all recall how well that approach worked. Furthermore, there is something creepy and un-democratic about this entire enterprise. Recall, *Collateral Damage* is directed at teachers and “cultural workers” (an undefined term with an almost Soviet smell about it). It is they who are to carry out the re-education of children so that they will see reality as a war between the people and evil capitalism. Nowhere is it mentioned whether parents are to be consulted whether they want their children being taught such things. Having spent so many years in the capitalist system, perhaps Mom and Dads’ opinions cannot be trusted. ♣