Book Review

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Lipman, P. (2011). *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City.* New York, NY: Routledge. 205 pp. $33.55 (paperback). ISBN: 041580223.

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Who owns public goods? Conventional wisdom supposes that tax-paying citizens do, via the stewardship of elected officials. Education, housing, and transportation all fall into this category and are thus considered *nonexcludable* (no one can be effectively excluded from use) and *nonrivalrous* (use by one does not reduce availability to others). As such, ownership demands equal right and access to such goods, regardless of wealth and status.

The answer becomes less clear, however, when private companies step in to help cash-strapped municipalities maintain the quality of public goods. In theory, these public–private partnerships get the best of both worlds: local officials secure much needed financing or management expertise, and private firms gain status and goodwill in helping students academically achieve. Charter schools, which are publicly funded and privately managed, epitomize this relationship and have proliferated immensely over the past decade, especially in failing urban districts and natural disaster zones like New Orleans. If their goal is to prepare all students for college, shouldn't we do all that we can to increase private intervention?

According to Pauline Lipman, professor of educational policy studies at the University of Illinois–Chicago, the answer is an unequivocal no. She asserts in her book, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, that when you orient society toward economic goals, then urban development is seen as a *private good* that will add value to better compete in the labor market, as opposed to a *social good* that actualizes individual potential. Consequently, these goods become subject to market forces and managerial governance. The goal is no less than the accumulation of capital and power by the middle and upper class, which, needless to say, comes at the expense of the underclass who most rely on public goods.

Lipman examines these critical issues through the lens of neoliberalism, a political movement advocating economic liberalization, free trade, and open markets. By supporting the privatization of social goods and social enterprises, the deregulation of markets, and the promotion of private sector's role in society, neoliberal policies aim to make institutions and services more effective and efficient—usually resulting in the withdrawal of government from provision of social welfare. Lipman uses Chicago—the "zone of experimentation"—as the case study, similar to what she had done in her 2004 book, *High Stakes Education*. Though her new book neglects certain key supports and actionable solutions, Lipman incisively analyzes the dynamic interplay of neoliberal urban policy, gentrification, and racial displacement of the African American and Latino underclass.

For instance, Lipman cites the local government use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and public–private partnerships to facilitate market-driven urban development (the US$1.6 billion Plan for Transformation to overhaul public housing) under the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE IV) Act. It called for revitalizing distressed units, relocating public housing residents in site housing, giving them vouchers in the private housing market, and financing mixed-income development as public–private partnerships. The problem, according to Lipman, was that low-income families—most of whom were African American and Latino—were consistently displaced when a key revision in 1995 eliminated the requirement of one-to-one replacement that would have guaranteed return to the new or rehabbed units. As a public good, HOPE IV fails the nonexcludable and nonrivalrous consideration.

Mixed-income development similarly displaced low-income residents. Based on the theory that middle-class presence would disrupt the culture of poverty and raise the overall standard of living, mixed-income communities called for one-third of the units to be used as public housing, one-third to be affordable units, and one-third to be market rate units (or sometimes a 60/40 ratio of middle-income/low-income families). Again, Lipman contends that such development distorts government priorities from providing for people's basic needs to a profit-driven agenda that utilizes competition to attract market rate renters. Further studies indicated little social interaction across class, which would invalidate the "rising tide lifts all boats" rationale.

Mixed income schools faced the same problem. Under the market-driven Renaissance 2010 initiative to turn around failing schools in mixed-income communities, former Chicago Mayor Daley and School Chancellor Arne Duncan closed 60 public schools and opened 100 new schools—one-third charter, one-third contract (privately run schools that operate much like charter schools), and one-third "Performance Schools" (public schools with 5-year performance contracts and subject to Ren2010 policies). Lipman suggested that Ren2010 was a Trojan horse created to dismantle public schools in low-income areas and to furtively "gentrify" the replacement schools with a mixed population that would ultimately boost the urban economy. It was beset with problems, such as inadequate resources that negated school repair and insufficient staff/professional development that set students up for failure. Such market-driven practices also hindered low-income families with potentially exclusionary stipulations (e.g., limited enrollment, informal selection mechanisms such as lotteries, not reserving seats for displaced students, not offering programs or grades as the closed schools did, complex admissions processes). The author effectively tied this together with the scathing admonition from the Kenwood Oakland Local School Council Alliance:

> Over 90% of the students who attend Mid-South schools are from low-income, African-American families. The Mid-South plan says that the schools will serve 1/3 middle-income, 1/3 moderate-income, and 1/3 low-income students. What happens to the other 2/3 low-income students? DISPLACEMENT. (p. 82)

Though Lipman is not against the idea of mixed-income communities and schools, current neoliberal proposals hurt the underclass and marginalize existing racial discrimination and the historical struggle for excellence by African Americans in the face of such inequities.

The rapid development of corporate venture philanthropy over the past decade was the most compelling example where Lipman demonstrated the neoliberal restructuring of urban education. By treating schooling as a private consumable service that promotes entrepreneurial remedies in school reform in the name of economic competitiveness, private donors like the Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation have spent billions in restructuring schools, resetting education agendas, and organizing parents and youths. The Academy of Urban School Leadership (AUSL), a major recipient of Gates funding, has emerged as the national model for urban school takeover operators. She compared their development to the fortunes amassed by the robber barons and industrialists of the 19th century, leveraging their enormous wealth to shape urban social policy in areas such as health, education, and the environment. Such influence highlights a quintessentially neoliberal practice of "governance" by private sector management experts, as opposed to government by an elected and publicly accountable body.

As responsibility of crucial social service provisions shift to private hands, public accountability and help for the needy disappear, further contributing to racial and class marginalization.

Yet venture philanthropists strategically leverage these marginalized groups to support neoliberal initiatives. The Gates Foundation, for instance, capitalized on parents' dissatisfaction of the Chicago public school system and urged them to support charter school expansion as their best option. Through funded workshops, literature, and summit speakers, grassroots organizations like Parents for School Choice add political legitimacy to neoliberal reforms and further undermine opposition and counterhegemonic solutions. Policy makers cannot afford to dismiss such powerful political allies. Yet Lipman believes that parents, in fact, do not claim ideological allegiance to school markets or privatization; rather, they seek to make pragmatic choices in the face of difficult circumstances.

However, her cogent criticism of market-driven reforms could have been bolstered further had she included two other pieces of evidence. One is the role of merit pay in the rapidly growing call for performance-based teacher evaluations. Critics contend that such schemes (a) create a competitive, rather than cooperative, atmosphere among teachers; and (b) pervert the teaching and learning process, leading to self-preservationist tactics and "gamesmanship" (e.g., moving to higher income districts where students are likelier to perform well) that ultimately marginalize the underclass. In this respect, one could imagine the relevance of merit pay (and to some extent, performance-based teacher evaluations) in neoliberal reform, a point that Lipman appears to have neglected.

She also seems to have overlooked the mounting evidence that found little differences in achievement between charter schools/voucher programs and traditional public schools. These included the well-known 2009 report on *Charter School Performance in 16 States* by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) out of Stanford University, the 2010 *Evaluation of Charter School Impacts* by the National Center for Education Evaluation (NCEE), and the 2010 evaluation of the Milwaukee school voucher program—all of which would add empirical credibility to her analysis. What is the value of these reforms if they demonstrate no measurable improvement in student achievement?

Lipman concludes that a radical transformation of capitalism is needed; yet solutions that require such paradigmatic shifts are typically broad and consequently leave the reader unsatisfied. For example, she calls for a new 21st century humanist and socialist alternative to capitalism that better represent the "dispossessed, exploited, and alienated" but provide little practical guidance as to how to get there. References to emerging movements rooted in economic cooperation and participatory democracy (e.g., Bamako Appeal, the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements, Bolivia's Movement for Socialism, and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas) are illuminating but difficult to reify in a U.S. context without further details.

Solutions for education involve reframing the neoliberal discourse to one based on inputs (equitable resources) rather than outputs (tests), and using it as a tool for liberation (i.e., developing critical consciousness a la Grassroots Education Movement and Rethinking Schools). No doubt the idea of equity initiatives is appealing but highly polarizing, given that certain groups (e.g., the gifted population) will garner fewer resources than others. More conceivable is Lipman's call for more collaboration among proactive education movements that will link "islands of excellence" into networks capable of reframing the neoliberal education discourse.

Lipman's call to action, captured in the concept of "right to the city" (the demand for a transformed and renewed access to urban life), is the real strength of this book. It is timely, not just within urban school reform but also within the larger social and political context where overall public education reform has been marked by increased market-driven reforms. Unlike the critics who bemoan the growing privatization of public education, Lipman situates it as part of a larger neoliberal movement that affects urban development toward a global market economy, which ultimately makes her case utterly potent and a natural follow-up of her 2004 book. If this book serves as the manifesto for reimagined 21st-century socialism, then perhaps her third book will be the blueprint for action to corral the islands of excellence.

This book is ideal for educators, sociology students, and change agents.

Bio

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