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Review of
Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools
by Kenneth J. Saltman (Paradigm Publishers, 2007)

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Kenneth Saltman's *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* is, at its root, a critique of the power of neoliberal thought and the ways in which that thought is used to justify the privatization of schooling in America and abroad. More specifically, Saltman's study is one that looks at the ways in which disasters (natural and manmade) have been used by businesses and elite power brokers to accumulate profit from the educational sector. In essence, Saltman argues that these groups use disaster to engage in "smash and grab disaster capitalism," (5) with an end goal of diminishing the role of public schooling as a sight for democratic in favor of privatized forms of education. Saltman quotes Naomi Klein's definition of disaster capitalism to clarify this point, calling it a "predatory form of disaster capitalism that uses the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering. And on this front, the reconstruction industry works so quickly and efficiently that the privatizations and land grabs are usually locked in before the local population knows what hit them" (1).

It is within this broad framework that Saltman examines 1) the plundering of public schooling in New Orleans post-Katrina, 2) Democracy "Promotion" in Iraq, and 3) Chicago's Renaissance 2010 project and the 4) impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) on breaking public education. Saltman's argument and indeed the central thesis of the book is that this type of predatory capitalism and the logic used to justify such actions are a threat to the survival of democracy in the United States. He writes, "This right-wing movement imperils the development of public schools as crucial sites for engaged critical democracy while undermining the public purposes of public education and amassing vast profits for a few, and even furthering U.S. foreign policy agendas" (3).

Each chapter lays out the case that "back door privatization" seeks to dismantle public education so that private companies cannot only make money off of the perceived failings of public schools, but to do so in ways that deregulate local power structures and harbor hostilities towards teachers' unions, while at the same time engage in "educational experiments" that have no research to support them (i.e., vouchers

and charter schools). In looking at New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Saltman examines the practices of Akima, a for-profit educational contractor who was given a no-bid contract to build temporary classrooms in the wake of the disaster. This translated into the largest ever school voucher experiment in the nation, in effect creating a network of charter schools for a privileged few, instead of addressing the systemic needs of the region. In looking at the “democracy promotion” programs in Iraq, the for-profit group Creative Associates International, Incorporated (CAII), earned over one hundred million dollars from no bid contracts to rebuild schools and develop U.S. style charter schools. In this scheme, the overwhelming majority of funds were spent on security, while creating a pro-US curriculum, leaving Iraq’s schools in worse condition than before the invasion. In Chicago, the Renaissance 2010 Plan, which was written and implemented by commercial groups in Chicago, will serve to close 100 public schools that are poor and non-white in an effort to gentrify the city. Saltman then closes with a discussion of NCLB and how this legislation serves to be a boon for private education companies and charter schools by setting up parameters that schools cannot, in actuality, attain.

Saltman’s look at disaster capitalism is one in which the intersecting matrices of politics, race, economics, education, and neoliberalism merge to create commonsense explanations (Bourdieu, 1990) of how education plays itself out in communities that are the most susceptible to symbolic violence in the first place. In essence, Saltman’s work is a call to not only be aware of the ways in

which powerful groups like Akima and CAII navigate the political sphere to earn millions of dollars in profit, but to be alarmed at the way the public sphere is giving way to the private in ways that are antithetical to the notion of public schools for the common good.

I found the strength of the book to be the detail with which Saltman lays out his case in each example—New Orleans, Iraq, Chicago—in showing how private companies with political influence received no bid contracts to further their own private agendas in the education sphere to set up EMOs, voucher plans, and unproven charter schools all in the name of profit, while at the same time exacerbating the already existing problems in each of these areas. As in the case of the pillaging of New Orleans by private investors post-Katrina, Saltman goes beyond the happenings on the ground, but gives the reader a solid analysis of the reasons and the “theories” (i.e., business models) that are behind such actions. The “developers” of the New Orleans plan heralded the opportunity post-Katrina as having a “silver-lining” because businesses and private investors could come in and “wipe the slate clean.” Just as Jonathan Kozol has pointed out previously, these communities and the ways that their schools “operate” are not the sole result of a disaster, but rather the result of years of neglect and non-funding; Katrina just served as the nail in the coffin. In his words, “[N]ow that the storm has done the clear-cutting, the dream of the field of economic competition can be built” (60).

In the case of Iraq, CAII uses words that are perceived as public minded and democratic, but in reality are tools in an

attempt to make sure that the democracy that Iraq adopts is in line with US interests. By moving through the analysis of corporate education schemes in Iraq, it is clear that two functions of education in a capitalist state are playing themselves out: the reproduction of capitalist conditions and the use of private education for a profit. In a country that is devastated by war, this plan, in conjunction with coercion, serves the interests of a polyarchy over a democratically conceived public sphere. From privatizing media outlets, to developing curricula that give no emphasis on democratic deliberation, to textbooks that downplay US actions in the region and their connection to the present war, to creating soap operas that stress law and order submission of citizens, CAII in Iraq serves to “make business values the apparent natural and neutral fabric of civil society” (94). The strength of the chapter on Iraq is the way in which it is apparent that the institution of these programs and the money that is being funneled to CAII are the result of a “sophisticated colonialism” (109), a colonialism in which military campaigns and the subsequent destruction they cause combined with the following reconstruction serve to rationalize the agenda of private educorporations in the

pillaging of the public sphere. To Saltman, the privatization push in US public schools can no longer be seen as separate from the military invasions and world view of the right; they are inexorably tied together and are a part of the same project of dismantling the public mission of public schools.

The power of this work lies not only in the ways in which Saltman shows the connection between business interests, educorporations, colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, but also in the ways that he makes clear the harm and threat that this has for public education. He follows the money trail, indicts those involved, and lays waste to the bankrupt ideology that organizations like the Edison Schools, CAII, and Renaissance 2010 use to justify pillaging public coffers while they destroy the potential that the public sphere represents for a democratic society. His is a call to defend the ideal of public education from the threat that a capitalist education poses to the development of democratic minded citizens who can question, criticize, and engage in collective action as participants, not spectators, in democratic society.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.