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## REVIEW OF KENNETH J. SALTMAN'S *COLLATERAL DAMAGE*:

### *Corporatizing Public Schools—A Threat to Democracy*

Pepi Leistyna

[People] rarely admit their fear of freedom openly, however, tending rather to camouflage it—sometimes unconsciously—by presenting themselves as defenders of freedom. But they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo; so that if [critical consciousness] threatens to place that status quo in question, it thereby seems to constitute a threat to freedom itself. (p.21) —*Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Driving home after a long day of teaching, I found myself behind a white Ford van marked with the classic signs of a working-class contract painter: rust, the permanent scars of spattered chemicals, balding tires, and a sleepy conductor. Neatly placed on the rear fender of the vehicle were two bumper stickers, bolstered with the flag's patriotic colors: the one on the right reading, "Freedom First" (an anti-government slogan); and on the left, "Elect Bush".

I thought to myself, with ever-increasing corporate control over fixed assets, trade, and the flow of information and telecommunications (Bauman, 1998; Chomsky, 1999; McChesney, 1999), neoliberals, such as George W. Bush, in the guise of excellence, individual freedom, national security, and the so-called "naturalness" of the market, are working diligently to take over any and all public space. This includes streets, law enforcement agencies, courts, prisons, health care, social security, public utilities, municipal services, governments, and legislation. As economic and cultural power becomes more centralized, the chasm between the rich and the poor widens, as does the war against labor unions, social services, and any grounds gained by Civil Rights advocates and activists.

It would take a mighty powerful political machine, with all the ideological tools of an efficient propaganda industry to keep the driver of the van (surely economically subordinated himself) from seeing the inherent contradiction between the two slogans—that the weaving of freedom and conservatism actually conflates corporate tyranny with individual liberty. But these days, getting the consent that informs such a Gramscian (1971) notion of hegemony is a sly and tricky deal: the key being to demonize the government while using that very body to dictate corporate policy. As Noam Chomsky (1999) reveals, in his critique of the "get the government off our backs" mentality: "You get the government out of the business of helping poor people, but make sure it's in the business of helping the rich" (p.106).

In his newest book, *Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools—A Threat to Democracy* (2000), Kenneth Saltman, an Assistant Professor in the Social and Cultural Studies in Education Program at DePaul University, clearly establishes that a major part of such a propaganda machine is to control public schooling. Neoliberals, following in the footsteps of their colonial predecessors, are vigilantly going after schools, which are widely acknowledged as agencies that disseminate knowledge, and can have a major

symbolic effect on people. As expressed in the work of the early anti-colonial theorists (Cabral, 1973; Fanon, 1967; Memmi, 1965; Ngugi, 1986), and echoed in Saltman's research, imperialists have always understood the crucial role of schooling in controlling the psyche of human beings, and consequently in maintaining systems of oppression.

As the assault on public schools wages out of control, permitting conservatives to expand their ideology of the market, Saltman's informative book couldn't have come at a better time. Not unlike the contradiction of the bumper stickers, people are being led to believe that the privatization of public schooling creates no conflict of interest, no tension, no reason for alarm. However, the Bush Presidency's superimposition of compassionate rhetoric and draconian social and educational policies—choice, vouchers, standardized testing schemes, character education, lock-down school safety programs, and charter schools—will ensure that freedom, human rights, social justice, and the real possibilities of a participatory democracy will never come to fruition (Giroux, 2001). As Saltman reveals in the introduction of his new book,

As federal responsibility for such public goods as social service provision and public schooling shifts to private corporations and state control, the federal government is increasingly rendered a disciplinary entity concerned primarily with military, policing, prisons, and courts. (p.xvii)

Chapter One of Saltman's book, "Educational Privatization and the Assault on Public Schools," confronts the prevailing claims of proponents of school privatization, and works to dismantle the omnipresent market metaphors of *efficiency, competition, the failure of public education, equity, accountability, democracy, and individual freedom of choice*. He convincingly demonstrates that such language is misused in order to obfuscate the licentious and fundamentally anti-democratic agenda that informs the corporate seizure of public schools, stating, "Mounting evidence suggests that, among other things, privatization increases bureaucracy, increases costs, increases the potential for abuse and corruption, decreases public oversight, and decreases the stability and reliability of high quality services" (p. 1). In deconstructing these contradictions, the author portrays how the power elite in this society are working against the values that they publicly profess, such as community, the growth and health of children, and the social and economic well-being of all people.

Chapter Two, "Nothing Left to Choose: Education, Democracy, and School Choice," continues this discussion and analysis by dissecting the inherent problems and discrepancies within market-based school choice/voucher proposals—the history, language, and logic therein.

Chapter Three, "Coca-Cola and the Commercialization of Public Schools," analyses the rise of corporate culture in public education through such private interests as Channel One, Lifetime Learning, General Mills, Campbell Soup, Citibank, McDonald's, IBM, Nike, and Disney. Saltman describes in no uncertain terms how the commercialization of public space, identity, and pedagogy--vigorously promoted by these private interests--works to produce, not critical and civic-minded adults capable of participating in a democratic society, but rather, atoms of consumption who come to perceive diversity and social responsibility as an endless conveyor belt of products to be readily purchased and consumed. Saltman grounds his theory in this particular chapter in the example of the "Coke Day" suspension of a student in Georgia who was punished for wearing a Pepsi tee-shirt as a sign of defiance when he was ordered to adorn himself in Coke attire for a school group photo. This chapter not only lays bare the risks of commodifying identities and culture through the formal pedagogical process, but it also sets forth a counter-discourse and agenda that could help educators, students, caregivers, and communities of struggle dismantle such oppressive regimes. As the author states, "The anticorporate, propublic strategies of critical education should link the struggle against the commercialization of public schools to broader social struggles against exploitation and for democracy" (p.73).

Chapter Four, "Collateral Damage," analyzes the ever-increasing militarization of schools that house

racially subordinated and poor children so as to "understand the connections between private social vision and the formation of a carceral state for marginalized segments of the population" (p. xxv). This chapter is especially important as the United States which has just five percent of the world's population has twenty-five percent of its prisoners. In fact, there are over two million people incarcerated in the U.S.—the most of any country (surpassing Russia in the year 2000), 5-17 times higher than all other Western nations. By the end of 1999, 6.3 million people were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole in the U.S.—with the majority being from racialized and marginalized backgrounds. It is crucial for educators, all citizens for that matter, to understand the connection that Saltman makes among schools as militarized holding tanks for the poor and racially subordinated, the prison industrial complex (one of the largest growing private industries in the country), and the logic of the Pentagon system and its insatiable appetite for global violence and domination in the guise of humanitarian efforts. [Editors' note: see *Workplace* 3.2 (December 2000) for our own efforts to highlight "The Prison Issue."]

Chapter Five, "Pedagogues, Pedophiles, and Other Lovers: The Constructed Crisis of the Predatory Teacher," confronts the teacher-bashing of the popular media that works to reduce the job of such public intellectuals to virtually powerless (that is, except for the authority vested in them to impose discipline on students), efficient drill sergeants whose only moral concern should be to uncritically implement prescribed curricula, without pedagogical or ethical concern. Saltman profoundly understands the realities and dangers of what Freire noted so long ago in his revolutionary book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: In their political activity, the dominant elites utilize the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter's "submerged" state of consciousness, and take advantage of that passivity to "fill" that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom. (p.84)

What these five chapters cogently reveal is that the market cannot solve what it in fact in large part creates—that class warfare, white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and discrimination of all kinds that produce and perpetuate poverty, social inequalities, antagonisms, and poor academic performance cannot be eradicated by the material and symbolic conditions of feudalistic forms of capitalism. Instead, Saltman courageously calls for a radical democratic shift that interrogates the deeply embedded roots of oppression in this country. Embracing critical pedagogy, this author understands that "a critical consciousness that threatens to place that status quo in question", is not a threat to freedom itself, but the only road to such liberty.

Readers of Saltman's work will rediscover that keeping schools public (where participation, dissent, and meaning-making are central) is essential to keeping democracy alive and vibrant. As such, *Collateral Damage* is a must read for any college-level course in the areas of sociology, foundations in education, teacher education, curriculum development, cultural studies, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies. In fact, it is a must read for anyone driving down the road who is really interested in rupturing the forces that control our lives. Saltman's critical pedagogical insights expose the contradictions within reactionary notions of freedom, as his fight is for the kinds of liberty that only democracy and its on-going participatory process could allow.

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