THE PRIVATIZED PUBLIC: ANTAGONISM FOR A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN SCHOOLS?

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ABSTRACT: In an extended era of privatization initiatives, when accountability principles and competitive business logics pervade school discourse and practice, what is left of the “public” part of public schooling? When market rationality privileges individualism and competition and provides much of the justification for the aims of U.S. schools, how is the notion of the public good evidenced? In this essay Deron Boyles makes the claim that public schools inordinately function as private markets — as places where a unidirectional narrative of “givens” reinforce individualism, competition, and corporatization under the guise of merit, testing, and school-business partnerships.

In an extended era of privatization initiatives, when accountability principles and competitive business logics pervade school discourse and practice, what is left of the “public” part of public schooling? When market rationality privileges individualism and competition and provides much of the justification for the aims of U.S. schools, how is the notion of the public good evidenced? My claim is that public schools inordinately function as private markets — as places where a unidirectional narrative of “givens” reinforce individualism, competition, and corporatization under the guise of merit, testing, and school-business partnerships. I stipulate that public schools, if they are to be public in any meaningful way, must be more than places where all children have an equal opportunity to learn. Instead, public schools must repeatedly demonstrate critical analysis of what goes on in those schools by the very people in them: primarily teachers and students. The type of critical analysis that I think is central to the public notion of a public school does not subordinate criticality to standardized curricula, procedures, or testing. Wherever schools represent and reinforce the commodification of capitalist ideology without critique is where the “public” part of public schooling capitulates to an ideology of privatization. While not a predetermined “given,” elements such as standardized curricula, tracking, and the many particular instances of product placement under the guise of “partnerships” each constitute part of what I take to be a significant problem in claiming public schools as public. The constitutive parts should instead, I argue, become the object lessons that yield authentically public schools. My goal, then, is to problematize the notion of the public good by interrogating how schools function as restrictive spaces incompatible with the democratic public interests repeatedly attributed to

them.  

I contend that the function of schools as privatized spaces for free market rationality systematically thwarts teacher agency, student agency, critical inquiry, and democratic participation.

This essay highlights a small but significant part of the larger history regarding schooling for the public versus private good. I maintain that the usefulness of "the public good" as a rationale for public schooling is problematic in at least two distinct ways: (1) it convolutes and conceals the role of private interests that are increasingly pervading public schools; and (2) it functionally and materially furthers market conditions that support an oligarchic versus a democratic republic. Furthermore, because of that problematic stipulation, I suggest that schools use such things as advertising, commercialism, and school-business partnerships as object lessons for the construction of counterpublics where social transaction and critical transitivity develop an engaged citizenry for a [comparatively] radical democratic politics.

In other words, "the public good" has become so privatized as to have lost any significant comparative, differentiated, or substantive meaning and should be replaced with a form of criticality that advances democratic social potential over capitalist interests and individualistic competition.

The concept of the public, to be clear, has not lost its usefulness to rally support and advance a wide variety of political and economic agendas that construe schooling in particular ways. The notion of "the public good" continues to be used by various social, religious, and political entities intent on gaining and maintaining power.

Yet the use to which that power is put represents a perverse irony about "the public good": it is not public — at least not in a radically democratic sense that is critical of corporate or business influence over politics, public debate, and schooling. It also is not singular, as there are a number of publics and counterpublics, many of which have historically been left out of the "public"
debate about public schools. The discourses that developed “the public good,” in other words, constructed an idea that masks the restriction of agency and voice that it touts as central to its being, to its ontic state. Gaining and maintaining such power rests on the use of language games to convey (denotatively, declaratively, and prescriptively) existence and value. These language games hype the “reality” of global competition and technological advancements, extend to the ensuing belief that schools should exist to produce workers for globalized markets and technological imperatives, and reify a discourse outside of which many people cannot imagine. Therein lies both the problem and the possibilities that I wish to trouble in this essay.

**Brief Historical Considerations of the Public Good and Schools**

From individual case studies to general histories of U.S. schools, historians have established a significant literature on the development of public schools, including the role “the public good” has played as part of the development and rationales of schools and schooling. Some historians have recently focused on the development of common schools and private academies in the early nineteenth century and how they often operated in a similar fiscal fashion insofar as each received public funds *and* each required private tuition. Other historians provide broad and inclusive historical analyses about the development of public schools, while still others focus the general issue of public schooling on specific topics such as the development of high schools. The idea of schools as markets dates at least as far back as the 1760s, and there is ample evidence that the common school movement of the 1830s developed after the expansion [in both the North and South] of many other kinds of school markets (including charity schools, Latin grammar schools, denominational schools, academies, and so on). It seems odd


7. See, for example, Nancy Beadie, “Toward a History of Education Markets in the United States: An Introduction,” *Social Science History* 32, no. 1 (2008): 47–73; Nancy Beadie, “Tuition Funding for Common Schools: Education Markets and Market Regulation in Rural New York, 1815–1850,” *Social Science History* 32, no. 1 (2008): 107–133; and David F. Mitch, “Market Forces and Market Failure in Antebellum American Education: A Commentary,” *Social Science History* 32, no. 1 (2008): 135–139. The importance of this point is that the conflation of the “private” and “public” is longstanding, even if the point of this essay is not the distinction between public and private schooling as such. Common schools, long connected with Horace Mann’s vision for “free” schooling, were not, therefore, “free” since tuition in addition to taxes was required.


to me, therefore, to reinforce the mythology that common schools were really public or democratic and that they served a public good above and beyond the vexing issues of immigration, assimilation, citizenship, “rugged individualism,” religion, and so on.10 As an institutionalizing force or practice, common schools were neither public nor democratic in anything other than a cursory or symbolic way. They were, instead, a functional market representation of the colonizing forces of a middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, male hierarchy imbued with the specific capitalist economic system it promoted.11

What this scholarship indicates is that the history of education is far more complicated when it comes to issues of private versus public goods than many may realize. Beyond this truism, and in terms of the present topic, a public good may be neither public nor good.12 Is assimilation of immigrants into “an American culture” a public good?13 Is the schooling of girls supposed to be the


same as or similar to that of boys? Should schools teach reading, or is reading instruction the purview of the family and home? If public school is the place for reading instruction, should it be taught by means of a protestant Christian (King James) version of the bible, memorization and recitation, McGuffey readers, whole language, “reader-response,” or something else entirely?14 These questions include historical elements of the debates over the aims and goals of schooling for the public good, and the variety of (competing) ideas reveals much about the underlying socioeconomic value associated with schooling. Significantly, we should remember which voices were, and which voices were not, historically part of the “public” debate.15

Perhaps the underlying socioeconomic value is best seen in the development of schools beyond common schools. From experiments in factory training in Lowell, Massachusetts, to efficiency measures in the “platoon system” in Gary, Indiana, to programmed instruction in Winnetka, Illinois, schooling in the United States continually reinforced socially constructed hierarchies, vocations, and private industrial interests, overwhelmingly to the benefit of white men.16 Even if one allows for the growth of high schools as primarily “humanist” college preparatory institutions in the middle to late nineteenth century, an elitist preparation still reinforces a socially constructed hierarchy and preparation for a future career, albeit deferred to college.17 One result of this development of schooling is the production of a metanarrative that inscribes and reinscribes the “given” reasons for schooling: preparation for a job in an industrial, technological, or global economy.18


A review of history also reveals the various discourses that use “the public” as an *a priori* concept made material in the United States. It is as though the country and its schools simply “were,” rather than specifically developed; that is, they appeared “ready-made” instead of being intentionally constructed. Publics emerge out of social transactions among people and are not to be confused with states or governments abstracted from their actions and consequences. The metanarratives of who we are and how we came to be do not distinguish or locate power within contestation. John Dewey made much of this distinction in *The Public and Its Problems* when he noted that “the theory [of specific causal authorship] flattered the conceit of those nations which, being politically ‘advanced,’ assumed that they were so near the apex of evolution as to wear the crown of statehood.” Part of Dewey’s point was to tease out of history the features ascribed to private, public, and governmental realms and to criticize individuals who and institutions that subjugated public goods to private interests by way of governmental authority. Dewey noted the connection to feudal England, but extended the point to private business when he wrote this:

Various devices were invented and fictions set up by means of which the jurisdiction of kingly courts was extended. The method was to allege that various offenses, formerly attended to by local courts, were infractions of the king’s peace. The centralizing movement went till the king’s justice had a monopoly. The instance is significant. A measure instigated by desire to increase the power and profit of the royal dynasty became an impersonal public function by bare extension. The same sort of thing has repeatedly occurred when personal prerogatives have passed into normal political processes. Something of the same sort is manifested in contemporary [U.S.] life when modes of private business become “affected with public interest” because of quantitative expansion.

Dewey’s criticism is that a private interest masquerading as a public one, under the aegis of government, is still a private interest. The corollary: Private interests masquerading as public ones, under the aegis of public schools, are still private interests. To say, for example, that schools serve the public good by providing workers for private enterprise is a manipulative discursive move that conflates schooling with training and therefore myopically narrows the very possibility for agency for which this essay ultimately argues. As Dewey noted, narrowly conceiving schooling as training is “ineffective for every industrial end except setting up a congested labor market in the skilled trades and a better grade of labor — at public expense — for employers to exploit.”

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Beyond Dewey’s critique, but related to the hegemony of industry, Stuart Ewen notes that

> it became a central function of business to be able to define a social order which would feed and adhere to the demands of the productive process and at the same time absorb, neutralize, and contain the transitional impulses of a working class emerging from the unrequited drudgery of nineteenth-century industrialization.²³

This period coheres with Elizabeth Kelly’s view of history in that she believes a bourgeois public emerged that argued for democratic discourse, but was ultimately overwhelmed by the forces of monopolistic capitalism. From around 1870 to just before World War I, the United States came closest to a democratic, if still classed, sexed, and raced, understanding of what public engagement could be, according to Kelly.²⁴

Following the progression of time from World War I through World War II through the post-Sputnik era, expansion of the military-industrial complex represents an extended form of encroachment of private business interests in public schools in the name of the public good.²⁵ As Sandra Jackson observes,

> the underlying assumptions and arguments are the same … to make an apparent case for change, while proclaiming broad social benefits for everyone, which will in reality sustain the status quo because the matters of structural barriers to equity and opportunity — access as well as outcomes — go unacknowledged and thus unaddressed, unexamined, and hence undisturbed in perpetuating inequalities.²⁶

no. 3 (1969): 385–400. Dewey also noted that the “drift of nominal democracy from the conception of life which may properly be characterized as democratic has come about under the influence of a so-called rugged individualism that defines the liberty of individuals in the terms of the inequality bred by existing economic-legal institutions. In so doing, it puts an almost exclusive emphasis upon those natural capacities of individuals that have power to effect pecuniary and materialistic acquisitions. For our existing materialism, with the blight to which it subjects the cultural development of individuals, is the inevitable product of exaggeration of the economic liberty of the few at the expense of the all-round liberty of the many. And, I repeat, this limitation upon genuine liberty is the inevitable product of the inequality that arises and must arise under the operations of institutionally established and supported finance-capitalism” [Dewey, Problems of Men, 117].


24. Kelly, Education, Democracy, and Public Knowledge, 30–31. She argues that there were glimpses of public discourse that challenged capitalist assumptions about the role of individuals and schools in society but, even granting a sympathetic reading of Alexis de Tocqueville’s view of democratic participation, indicates that the discourse was “short-lived,” if it ever actually existed. See Kelly, Education, Democracy, and Public Knowledge, 31–33; and Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 58–63.


26. Sandra Jackson, “Commentary on the Rhetoric of Reform,” in Education as Enforcement, ed. Saltman and Gabbard, 224. I do not mean to overlook Harold Rugg and George Counts who, among
Renewed vocationalism in the 1970s led to the angst-ridden, economist-derived *A Nation at Risk* in the 1980s, a general discourse that has remained uninterrupted through *America 2000* and *No Child Left Behind* to the most recent Race to the Top strategy in the *Blueprint for Reform* that, again, uses economic competitiveness as a central rationale for school policy and practice.

Illustrative of the understanding of economic competition and schools-as-training-sites as a “given” are the claims made by Kathleen Wilcox and Pia Moriarty:

Like other industrialized societies, the United States has financed schools to socialize children to competence as adults. Society pays for schools; schools, in turn, attempt effectively to deliver children prepared to function in the full range of adult social roles. As social institutions, schools are not isolated and autonomous constructs, but integral parts of a social whole where institutions interact with and affect one another. In particular, schools must attend realistically to the demands of the workplace where most of their children will move as adults.27

Here Wilcox and Moriarty bring to light the assumption that a particular vocational reality exists that requires people to match or fit into it. In this way, the quest for certainty becomes a settled quest. We already “know” that the world requires a socialized set of young people to fit into preordained jobs, so we need schools to “deliver” those young people to the job market. This represents a public good because there is “interaction” between public schools and the private sphere that results in the maintenance of society. Even if we stipulate that there is “interaction” in the world between schools and society, if the consequences of that interaction inordinately favor private interests and subordinate young people to future occupational roles, how is that a public good when we divorce young people from a public (and critical) consideration of jobs in society?28 Indeed, if students are not already part of what constitutes the public, what do they represent in and for society? If students are not critically engaged regarding the focus on attaining and keeping a job, how will they find work that makes them happy and enthused?

In his 1920 book *Community Organization*, Joseph Kinmont Hart decried the separation of the private worker from the public citizen inherent in Wilcox and Moriarty’s assertion: “Democracy cannot abide the mere isolated worker, lost in the routine of his vocation. Every member of the democratic community ought to be a worker, and every worker ought to be a real member of the community.”29 Hart’s point, at least in part, is that even on the vocationalist

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assumption of careerism or job-holding, if students do not figure out the work most worthy for them, there will not be engagement with community life — life, that is, connected with work. Importantly, however, Hart underscored that having a job is not, itself, the point of contention. The concern is using the “lens” of “job” to restrictively construct both schooling and community life. That students will seek jobs that lead to careers is not inherently wrong. What is problematic is narrowing the purpose of public schooling to privatized job preparation at the expense of developing students’ criticality, connection, and understanding — and these elements are necessary for both public schooling and the private sphere.

Regardless, Wilcox and Moriarty advance a position that represents and reinforces the deeply ingrained assumption that schools serve “the demands of the workplace.” They, and their vocational position, are the beneficiaries of an already settled quest that indicates “what is.” Ontologically, schools produce students who go to work. As Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin put it,

Public education is both a subsidy to employers and a way for workers to gain social mobility, it trains young people to be good workers and good democrats, reproducing a class-structured labor force to fit into a historically defined division of labor, but also inculcating aspirations about the nature of work in a democratic society.

Carnoy and Levin’s point is both an ontic narrative and an indictment. They underscore how schools serve employers’ wants, all the while offering students avenues for “social mobility.” The illusory nature of that mobility, however, is revealed when we recognize the darker side of Carnoy and Levin’s point: schools reproduce class distinctions, even when suggesting that individual goals and personal effort are part of the key to meritocratic success. As Kelly points out, part of the difficulty here stems from the fact that individualism is deeply entrenched in American social and political culture. The moral and political primacy of the individual over the social has often been presented as the foundation of democracy; private happiness, individual initiative, and personal freedom are highly valued aspects of the ideal.

What appears to be valued is the circularity of the metanarrative of meritocracy. As Douglas Kellner has argued, the marketing effect of globalization “represents the triumph of the economy over politics and culture . . . and the hegemony of capital over all other domains of life.” By conflating the “is-ness” of capitalism


with the “ought-ness” of democracy, we are faced with “realities of life” that are beyond question; as though there is no need for, nor benefit from, questioning the neoclassical economic system so widely taken for granted as, in itself, “good.”

It is also easy to see how the logic of individualism and economic competition continues to prevail in present-day discourse.

Advertising, Consumer Materialism, and the Public versus the Private Good

In July 2010, John Ebersole, president of Excelsior College, took out a full-page advertisement in the Chronicle of Higher Education in order to make his case for schools serving the economy. “Having once led the world in the percentage of adult workers ages 24–64 who have a degree,” writes Ebersole, “the U.S. now ranks 17th among those with a bachelor’s degree among major industrialized nations.” His assertion comes after this opening line: “America does not have the workforce necessary for the economy it has and needs.” What follows from such claims, according to the advertisement, are a series of education initiatives that variously rely on economic data to make the case for a “national imperative” of higher education (the call to which Ebersole’s college can, of course, answer). In this case, the public good follows from private, competitive interests. Grant that the advertisement is a marketing tool for Ebersole’s college. Grant, too, that his statistics are accurate and that “major industrialized nations” is an unproblematic concept. The advertisement remains a telling example of market logic serving as the rationale for schooling, whether for higher education specifically or general education more broadly. Ebersole’s advertisement, like so many other advertisements for online degrees, executive programs, career institutes, and so on, is both materially and symbolically representative of private interests recast as a public good. He references “America” in such a way as to call upon a kind of collective public ideal that is served when we take classes at his college or other colleges that ascribe to his economistic rationality. Herein resides a subtle but important point: the degree to which advertisements influence public perceptions. The work of Douglas Kellner, among others, indicates that an advertisement such as Ebersole’s is so taken for granted that the disclaimer “paid advertisement” is


36. Ebersole, “A Call to Action.” For a different view of the role of higher education, see Gregory S. Prince, Jr., Teach Them to Challenge Authority: Educating for Healthy Societies (New York: Continuum, 2008).
not likely to influence [or even register with] readers. Beyond advertisements about schooling, note that the history of advertising lent itself to advertising in schools, too. This point illustrates the broader argument about public and private interests and how private interests influence what we understand to be “public.”

At least as far back as the 1940s, corporations were influenced by the survey research of the psychological and behavioral sciences. In the *Journal of Retailing*, for example, article after article discussed the target audience in identical terms — using “Mr. and Mrs. Consumer” to describe what was essentially the middle class, a larger and growing segment of the population in the 1940s. Marketers targeted that population as shopping centers began appearing in the suburbs. The grouping was basically homogenous, however. In 1956, Wendell Smith offered a new idea. In an article in the *Journal of Marketing*, Smith came up with the idea of market segmentation. He argued that as companies recognized that “their core markets have already been developed...to the point where additional advertising and selling expenditures [are] yielding diminishing returns, attention to smaller or fringe market segments...are of crucial importance to the aggregate.” Along with Pierre Martineau, Smith advanced “a new axiom of marketing, whether applied to cigarettes or refrigerators: homogeneity of buyers within a segmented market, heterogeneity between segmented markets.” In schools, this is eerily similar to tracking, which has its origins in the social efficiency advocates’ rationale that schools should be analogous to factories, workers and managers hierarchically positioned as workers, and outcomes, “pets,” or widgets the products called students. “Thus,” as Kelly notes, “the public underwent a further transformation as citizens became consumers of media images and events instead


41. See Molnar, *School Commercialism, 7ff; Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago:
of direct participants in political and cultural debates." \(^4^2\) Add to the enormous increase in school-business partnerships the issue of advertising in schools, and it is very difficult to understand schools as anything other than private — and captive — markets. \(^4^3\)

When we talk of contemporary schooling in the United States, therefore, we should be mindful of this long history of influence by private business over schools and schooling. It would be a mistake to think of schooling as though it was in the public sphere and for the public good — as though there was one meta-debate that, once settled, meant all debates yielded agreement. They did not, although there is, again, evidence that job preparation was a primary goal of schooling for over a century. \(^4^4\) I leave the more specific historical interpretations to those better equipped to offer them, but my point is that the focus on "the public good" is perpetually subsumed or infiltrated by private commercial interests. As a marketer, if I can lead people to believe that their market segment's identity rests on consuming particular products, as indicated by Smith and Martineau, I am able to set up the conditions to achieve inclusion and the stability of identity within the market segment. As a teacher or parent in the role of consumer-citizen, if I can lead students to believe [and hegemonically reinforce] that their role is to acquire job skills for future productive employment, I am able to set up the conditions for schooling that privilege utility, immediacy, and practices already subsumed by market logic. \(^4^5\) Such a result is what I call consumer materialism.

Consumer materialism is the focus only or primarily on goods and ends. Perhaps best characterized by students wanting to know how little they have to do in order to "get" a passing grade or whether they are going to "get" their "money's worth" out of a course, consumer materialism circumvents the difficult and often messy processes of questioning in favor of immediate satisfaction. Consumer materialism is also the valuing of easy answers over critical investigation. Linked to convenience, consumer materialism manifests itself in schools through business partnerships when the ends or goods (for example, exclusive cola contracts, "free" pizza, trips to amusement parks, rewards for promoting "partner" logos, and the like) become the focus and, further, where


\(^{43}\) For more on school-business partnerships, see the variety of reports from the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at http://epicpolicy.org/ceru/publications/611?page=6.


this focus is not analyzed or investigated. Consumer materialism commodifies student and teacher existence by reducing searching, questioning, and thinking to objectified and reductionistic particulars. For schooling, it means [in part] that students see their role as seeking “right” answers to questions instead of searching for meaning by questioning, contesting, and antagonizing. Similarly, teachers see their role as seeking preordained procedures that will allow the efficient transfer of information from them (or the adopted texts or prepackaged curricula) to their students. Accordingly, teachers demonstrate consumer materialism when they participate in advertising campaigns and school-business partnerships without questioning and analyzing the ideological, symbolic, and practical consequences of promoting and partnering with the private sector in overtly commercial ways. Does this mean that teachers and students have no agency? Are schools therefore doomed to repeat what history seems to indicate: the replication of class differences and the status quo? Students and teachers may, in isolated instances, act as agents repeatedly in schools, but, I submit, those instances constitute the minority of their actions. That agency is sometimes evident does not mean that schooling has successfully put in place the critical or radically democratic ethic for which this essay argues. In fact, much of the agency demonstrated by students and teachers is a form of resistance; rarely is it a form of productive change. A radical democratic politics in schools will require far more critical transitivity than is currently found in most schools. It will also require a shift in understanding — from “public” to “publics” — in order to overcome the restrictiveness historically linked with the notion of “the public good.”

Toward Radical Democratic Politics in Schools: Achieving Critical Transitivity by Means of Object Lessons

Critical transitivity is best understood when compared to two other levels of awareness: intransitivity and semitransitivity. All three terms were coined by Paulo Freire. Intransitivity means “noncritical action”; it repudiates the power of individuals to change their existence when, for example, teachers claim “I can’t speak out about school-business partnerships because my school might lose funding or I might lose my job . . . that’s the ‘real world’ and I can’t do anything about it.” Semitransitivity, on the other hand, is characterized by individuals who see the world as changeable, but who also see the world in unrelated segments such that semitransitivity is two-dimensional and short term. Business groups may donate money, time, or materials, for example, but teachers do not ask whether businesses are getting tax credits, free advertising, or other “perks.”


47. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 57ff.

While intransitivity and semitransitivity are most visible in schools, Freire’s ultimate goal — critical transitivity — is rarely in evidence. Critical transitivity is demonstrated when individuals make, according to Ira Shor, “broad connections between individual experience and social issues…. In education, critically [transitive] teachers and students synthesize personal and social meanings with a specific theme, text, or issue.”49 Students and teachers who critique advertising, commercialism, and school-business partnerships, rather than seek them out or participate in them without question, are demonstrating, in nascent form, what critical transitivity requires.

The point of connecting consumer materialism and critical transitivity in relation to advertising, commercialism, and school-business partnerships is to engage students and teachers in debates and arguments over, for example, the motives for business involvement in schools, the benefits from partnerships for schools versus the benefits for businesses, and what is gained and lost in specific partnerships. Are businesses altruistic in their “support”? How much time and money is spent by school districts in “human hours” securing and maintaining partnerships? If businesses paid non-reduced taxes (for example, many businesses get tax reductions for locating in particular geographic areas), would the dollar amount of their “contributions” to schools be greater or smaller than what they would have paid if they had not received a tax break? These are the kinds of questions that critical transitivity requires and are also questions that, by virtue of their being formed and asked, challenge consumer materialist assumptions regarding easy answers and convenient, simple conclusions. They demarcate spaces of inquiry and action, investigation and growth, not answers for the purpose of satiation or closure.

Critical transitivity also uses processes of investigation that do not accept the impervious realities that Maxine Greene calls the “givens” of an imposed “real world.”50 In this sense, students would be better off being young philosophers of education: questioning their own schooling at the very time they are engaged in it. This questioning, again, is not for the purpose of “getting answers,” but is undertaken in order to problematize and make contingent what is otherwise taken to be “concluded” or “certain.” Unfortunately, formal opportunities for questioning are limited in the vast majority of schools, as curricula that emphasize testing, grading, and preparation for future life (that is, curricula that support consumerism, job and workforce preparation, and the development of specific skills) are overly plentiful. My concern here is that business partnerships inherently inhibit questioning and instead help to develop uncritical consumers rather than critically transitive citizens. This happens, in part, by their institutionalized nature. Accepted by schools and reinforced in society, business assumptions including consumer materialism and intransitivity become “beyond question.” Unwilling or unable to raise questions (for fear of losing a job, of frustrating others

by extending the time it takes to complete professional development sessions, and the like, teachers and school leaders often demonstrate for their students what it means to accede to the “given” of commercialism and consumer materialism. One result of this dynamic is that schools harbor noncriticality and confer diplomas on students (and employ teachers and administrators) who are unable (or unwilling?) to raise questions about motive, meaning, and the consequences — both positive and negative — of supporting business influences on and in schools. A cycle is established, then, where business expectations for schools beget schools that push products, provide free advertising, and “produce” future consumers who, in turn, favor and support business interests and corporate involvement in public schooling.

While a case might be made to get rid of advertising, commercialism, and school-business partnerships altogether, in this essay I ultimately (1) assume that advertisements, commercialism, and school-business partnerships are not going away; and (2) argue that, therefore, schools should exploit their “partnerships” by engaging in critically transitive investigations of the partnerships themselves as object lessons. This may be a surreptitious way to address advertising and commercialism in schools, and to slow the more than 300 percent increase in the number of school-business partnerships since 1990, but not investigating school-business partnerships is the surest way to continue the conflation of consumerism with citizenship and the understanding of private goods as public goods.

There are numerous examples of how pervasive private goods and commercialism are in schools today. Clorox provides teachers with lesson plans, stickers, and posters to foster a culture of cleanliness with reference to the “Clean Club” (consisting of “Ella the Elbow Cougher,” “Johnny the Germbuster,” and “Harry the Handwasher”) as part of Clorox’s “clean up the classroom” multimedia learning kit. In virtually every neighborhood grocery store, there are programs where a small percentage of sales will be “donated” to local schools. Coca-Cola has a summer “economics” institute program to promote competitive business practices. Campbell’s offers rewards for soup labels. Nissan automobile dealerships participate in “automotive services apprenticeships.” CiCi’s Pizza, Chick-fil-A, and other fast-food chains set aside one night each month when students and parents from participating schools come to the restaurant and then a percentage of the net sales (not gross) is “given” to the school. Subway provides “free” subs to local schools, and a representative from the store, in order to make an “educational” link, comes to those schools as a guest speaker on “health occupations.” McDonald’s has secured itself a spot in the cafeteria “choice” program in a Colorado school and offers business credit to students who “intern” as cooks and servers. Channel One is still connected to thousands of classrooms, providing students with a news program and commercials for jeans.

51. See the Educational Policy Research Unit and the Commercialism in Education Research Unit, http://epicpolicy.org/portal.
candy, makeup, and other “targeted” products.\textsuperscript{52} Wachovia Bank participates in an “Academy of Finance” program that claims to prepare junior high and high school students for “rewarding careers” in the financial services industry.\textsuperscript{53} As the General Accounting Office (GAO) warned a decade ago, the increase in commercialization in schools was rampant and growing. Constance Hays noted that

The GAO report cites textbook covers distributed by Clairol, Ralph Lauren, and Philip Morris with company names and logos fully displayed. In New York City, the Board of Education is considering a plan that would provide computers for all of its students, starting in the fourth grade. The computers might carry ads and possibly encourage shopping on a particular Web site.\textsuperscript{54}

Far from being limited to a couple of instances, advertising, commercialism, and school-business partnerships are increasing in number and variety and represent a larger agenda. The agenda is a probusiness, procapitalist, procareerist one that excludes questions about whether business exploits workers and schools, whether capitalism is the only or best economic theory,\textsuperscript{55} and whether elementary school students should be forced to consider their future based \textit{not} on substantive questions regarding “What do you want to \textit{be} when you grow up?” but on careerist questions of “What do you want to \textit{do} when you grow up?” Schools, then, are faced with programs connecting them with the interests of private businesses while also having outside forces further the idea that schools and businesses should become even more closely aligned.\textsuperscript{56} The problem, again, is that students and teachers become increasingly subsumed in a market logic that, in part because of its pervasiveness, appears impervious to critique.\textsuperscript{57}

To combat this pervasiveness, teachers and students should use the examples sketched in this essay as object lessons for critique. This critique is characteristic of a radical democratic politics because the project requires delimiting the discourse and embracing the vicissitudes of inquiry. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

\textsuperscript{52} See also Harry Brighouse, “Channel One, the Anti-Commercial Principle, and the Discontinuous Ethos,” \textit{Educational Policy} 19, no. 3 [2005]: 528–549.

\textsuperscript{53} For a longer list of examples, see Molnar, \textit{School Commercialism}, 47–71.


put it, “the educational system, labour relations, the discourses of the resistance of marginal populations construct original and irreducible forms of social protest, and thereby contribute all the discursive complexity and richness on which the programme of a radical democracy should be founded.” This means that schools reconstitute themselves as publics: plural spaces where investigations both delimit and [re]construct student and teacher identities as well as their varying agencies.

The “pluralization” of public to publics indicates diversity as well as locality. As Nancy Fraser points out, “the public” never existed. Instead, “there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working class publics.” Schools, by extension, are spaces for contestation, debate, and identity formation. The antithesis of schools that adopt “national standards,” schools-as-publics relish antagonism and vaunt critique by means of specificity of place and multiplicity of views. In this regard, the public sphere as public school, extending the analysis of Geoff Eley, positions schools as “the structured setting[s] where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place.” The virtues of this reconstructed notion of schools include, but are not limited to, (1) unshielding curricula as “given” and “transmittable”; (2) recasting the roles of students and teachers as inquisitive co-investigators; and (3) using already existing consumerist elements of society [namely, advertising, instances of commercialism, and school-business partnerships] as object lessons to deepen and expand understanding and meaning.

Pierre Bourdieu considers these elements necessary features of what he calls “realistic utopias”:

This is where the collective intellectual [students and teachers] can play its unique role, by helping to create the social conditions for the collective production of realistic utopias. It can organize or orchestrate joint research on novel forms of political action, on new manners of mobilizing and of making mobilized people work together, on new ways of elaborating projects and bringing them to fruition together. It can play the role of midwife by assisting the dynamics of working groups in their effort to express, and thereby discover, what they are and what they could or should be, and by helping with the reappropriation and accumulation of the immense stock of knowledge on the social world with which the social world is pregnant. It could thus help the victims of neoliberal policies to discover the differential effects of one and the same cause in apparently radically diverse events and experiences, especially for those who undergo them . . . in education, medicine, social welfare, etc.

To be sure, Bourdieu understands this task to be both “urgent and extremely difficult.” So does, or should, anyone familiar with the operation and function of “public schools” in the United States. They are so deeply entrenched in the

58. Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 192.
59. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 61.
61. Bourdieu, Firing Back, 21–22 [emphasis in original].
62. Ibid., 22.
discourse of business that it is very difficult, indeed, to see much hope for radical democratic change. But this reality, daunting though it is, should not deter those who understand the exploitative nature of capitalism and who wish to have students develop themselves beyond consumers of products (including schooling).

“What is needed,” Fraser reminds us, “is a post-bourgeois conception [of the public sphere] that can permit us to envision a greater role for ... public spheres than mere autonomous opinion formation removed from authoritative decision-making ... [that would] allow us to theorize the range of possible relations among such publics.”63 The challenge is to theorize while continually critiquing the theorizing. In other words, using object lessons to better understand corporate hegemony is not a panacea. There are, in fact, no lists or procedures to “bring about” critical transitivity that can be generalized, “taught,” or, perhaps especially, “modeled.” There is no rubric for criticality. Instead, critical transitivity emerges from the various and messy transactions between and among people willing to be wrong, willing to set aside deeply ingrained and long-held traditions, willing to achieve what the Greeks called elenchus: refutation. As Laclau and Mouffe put it,

Conflict and division ... are neither disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated nor empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of a harmony that we cannot attain because we will never be able to leave our particularities completely aside in order to act in accordance with our rational belief — a harmony which should nonetheless constitute the ideal towards which we strive.64

The hubris of certitude appears to me to be reserved for the “free marketeers,” the stalwart defenders of capitalism who view schools as training sites for future employment. As though free markets are actually free (proven demonstrably false, at least in 1929 and 2008), those who continue to see schools as the avenue for future corporate earnings or reduced unemployment percentages demean the potential of students, teachers, and the processes of teaching and learning in order to streamline thought and action for conformity to capitalist economic rationality. Instead, classrooms should be radically democratic counterpublic spaces where student and teacher inquiry is supportively antagonistic — and results in public schooling.

63. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 76–77.
64. Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, xvii.