

Hursh, D. W. (2015). *The End of Public Schools: The Corporate Reform Agenda to Privatize Education*. New York, NY: Routledge. Pages: 123. ISBN: 978-1-138-80448-7

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The topic of how neoliberalism shapes public education is well covered in the academic literature on the subject; much of it dedicated to documenting how its advocates are employing market principles to hollow out whatever sense of “public” remains in public education. In his recent book, *The End of Public Schools: The Corporate Reform Agenda to Privatize Education*, David W. Hursh sharpens the argument that the United States is witnessing the demise of its public schools at the hands of neoliberal advocates (or market fundamentalists) working in and through leading national and international foundations, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations. He provides a rich description of how these actors use their access to policy makers and the policy-making process to promote market principles and limit public control of education across all levels. He also documents resistance movements against such market reforms emerging across the United States.

A comprehensive analysis of the effects of these foundations, corporations, and non-governmental organizations supporting neoliberal policies in public education is beyond the scope of this single, five-chapter book. To contain his analysis, Hursh focuses on the United States (primarily the state of New York) and gives specific attention to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Pearson Education, state commissioners of education, the federal secretary of education, and Teach for America. Chapters 1 and 2 describe “the demise of the public in public schools” and “the rise of neoliberal policies” (p. 1). Chapters 3 and 4 thoroughly review “Governor Cuomo and the Neoliberal attack on public schools, teachers and unions” (p. 57), followed by an in-depth examination of how the Gates Foundation, Pearson, and Arne Duncan share assumptions about reform based on neoliberal ideals. Chapter 5 seeks to clarify “manufactured and real crises” (p. 104) and considers how we can respond to the real crises by “rethinking education and capitalism” (p. 104).

The theoretical underpinnings of *The End of Public Schools* reflect Hursh’s orientation as a critical democratic scholar. Hursh is a Professor of teaching and curriculum in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the University of Rochester, New York. His professional qualifications and understanding of issues such as standardized testing, teacher tenure, and charter schools influence and inform his analysis. He also uses a range of appropriate academic and grey sources to support his textual claims.

There are many compelling arguments in this book. Two central arguments stand out for their persuasiveness, imminence, and global resonance. The first is that there is struggle taking place in the United States (and globally) between two competing and, in Hursh’s articulation, opposite visions for society: one shaped by neoliberal tenets (e.g., an unregulated market, diminished government role in the public provision of goods and services, undermined democratic institutions and structures, etc.); and a second shaped by social liberal democratic tenets (e.g., government plays an important role in regulating markets and providing “services best provided through the government” (p. 3), supporting democratic institutions, structures, and processes). The argument is compelling and well supported, but there is a rhetorical gap. Hursh

presents the competition for the world's social imaginary as two opposing visions, and in doing so simplifies the discussion of the irreducibly diverse ideological aims of education and society. This binary also obscures the important point that most people are not ideological purists and, indeed, hold multiple and often competing views. Criticizing this oversimplification is important, because later in his analysis Hursh also implies a second pair of opposing groups: corporate reformers versus educators, parents, students, and community members. These two groups are not mutually exclusive and presenting them as such, much like the debate over the social imaginary, limits the potential to find solutions or consensus on issues that reflect and respect multiple perspectives on the aims of education. Framing debates as "them or us" ignores salient complexities and is rarely helpful in the long term.

Hursh's second central argument concerns the irreversible "rise of the network society" (p.107). He argues that the traditional understanding of policy-making through government hierarchies spanning local, state, and federal levels is now inadequate. Using their financial and political clout over a period of decades, international nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and corporations have gained access to policy makers and the policy-making process. Hursh characterizes this move as a shift from government hierarchies to governance by heterarchical networks of foundations, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations, which has created a complex and blurred web of decision-making. He makes the case that these policy actors have gained unprecedented access all without any obligation to be transparent or democratic; the public is often unaware of the role, or even the existence, of these actors. Hursh's analysis of the shift in policy-making from government to governance, and hierarchical to heterarchical networks, is impactful. Hursh reasons that ordinary citizens will never have access to such networks because most are not even aware that such a web of organizations and policy actors exist and exercise considerable influence in the policy-making process. Hursh implies that the inclusion of international policy actors in the policy-making process is not problematic on its own—it is the shift in focus and prioritization from the needs of students, parents, teachers, and community members to unelected and unaccountable leaders located at the periphery of the vast education governance web that he rightly identifies as problematic in a democratic society.

There are several notable secondary arguments in the book. Hursh presents a clear and strong case against the use of high-stakes standardized testing. This is achieved, in part, using examples of how these tests have been used for political purposes to blame public schools for social ills, smear teachers as purely self-interested, and distract public attention away from real issues, such as child poverty, while furthering the agenda to privatize schools. Though strongly presented, the case reads as one-sided since Hursh does not adequately acknowledge the potential of standardized testing to positively contribute to public education. This omission is important because it could potentially leave readers with the impression that all standardized testing is necessarily negative for students and schools. In Canada, for example, standardized tests like the Pan Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) are used to monitor high-level trends taking place across the country and inform the decision making of senior leaders. Concerning trends, such as declines in math scores, can result in Canada's ministers of education approving increased funding to support school level supports for students and teachers. It is not a high-stakes assessment, nor is it used to hold teachers accountable or blame schools. This is one example drawn from Canada's diverse education assessment context that illustrates how low stakes standardized testing can serve to improve public school systems for students and teachers.

A second notable argument is the charge against market fundamentalists who try to position markets as a natural, neutral force that needs to be set free. Hursh correctly points out that,

intentionally or unintentionally, fundamentalists ignore the reality that markets are embedded in any societies' political, legal, and cultural arrangements. In other words, markets are hardly natural or neutral—because they are political they can be manipulated to serve the interests of the few over the welfare of many. Hursh is not negating the utility of markets; rather, he is stressing the importance of regulating markets to ensure a certain level of economic fairness. To this end, he calls on educators (but should also have included education researchers) to become more familiar with economic theory and history so economic policy and practices are not left to economists alone.

I have five small criticisms of the book. Hursh claims that the neoliberal social imaginary has been successful, in part, because of the argument that “economic growth requires an economic system in which corporations are free to innovate within a market system. Furthermore, a growing economy requires skilled, efficient workers produced by teachers and schools that are held accountable” (p.27). Reading this quotation, I recalled an article written by Michael Apple (2001) comparing neoliberal projects and inequality in education. Apple writes, “[a]t the same time that progressives develop their theoretical agenda, the forces of conservative modernisation predictably fill that vacant space with much more (seemingly) grounded claims about the supposed efficacy of their ‘solutions’ to what they define as ‘our’ educational problems” (p.421). While Hursh’s point has merit, it has too much jargon and is too abstract to seriously engage non-academic readers in collective problem-solving action, which he repeatedly names as a goal throughout his book. Hursh is correct that students and parents are drawn to schools that claim to produce college and career-ready graduates (p. 29), but this draw is for good reason: people need employment to earn income so that they can participate in society. Apple is correct in that, so far, neoliberals have presented their case to average citizens in a manner that is more grounded in daily life. If Hursh is hoping to achieve a broader call to action beyond critical educators and those already sympathetic to their cause, then arguments opposing the current global competitive economic order is going to require more accessible and relatable arguments than those he presents in his book.

Hursh is also critical of market fundamentalists for their “almost religious faith in markets” (p.7) and stresses the need to counter the faith-based economics of market fundamentalism. Neoliberals and market fundamentalists are not the only ideologues whose vision of the world prevents them from understanding the perspective of others. Critical scholars seem to forget that the current economic model—or the status quo—is more “proven” than any other model in the collective consciousness of citizens in Western countries. The model generates a certain level of wealth and employment and, apparently, is perceived to distribute wealth fairly enough to avoid major, ongoing public protests. Any shift in the social imaginary to a different social vision (and different economic model) will likely require a collective, equally unshakable leap of faith to realize it. The shift to democracy also required such a leap to be realized, and its maintenance also seems to require unshakable faith. Faith in one’s view of the world can be a positive thing; the importance of respecting other views and building consensus, however, should also be emphasized in these discussions.

Relatedly, Hursh writes of the need to engage one another in solving our collective problems, and to think of new ways to engage with the planet’s environment. At times this imperative seems hollow given that he employs a consistently oppositional tone when discussing the role of neoliberal and neoconservative principles in this problem-solving process. His proposition that society must move toward a vision that opposes neoliberalism in favour of the liberal social democratic imaginary is problematic if it categorically excludes neoliberal and neoconservative voices in the problem-solving process. Market fundamentalists walk amongst progressives as neighbours, colleagues, and, possibly, friends. If Hursh truly believes that ev-

everyone is entitled to a voice in determining the future of public education, a more conciliatory tone in future texts might be appropriate.

Hursh uses the term “equality” repeatedly throughout his book but never defines or discusses its use in-depth. The consequences of inequality, from his view, are made clear and the perceived benefits of a more equal world are discussed. However, given the centrality of “equality” (e.g., pp. 7, 113, 114) in his preferred social liberal democratic imaginary, a deeper conversation of what an “equal world” (p. 113) means in the day-to-day life of average citizens, beyond basic political equality, would have been appropriate—especially given his social democratic vision still seems rooted in a liberal political/economic ideology that promotes markets, protects private property and, importantly, is ambivalent on matters of social equality (Sotto & Joseph, 2010).

Finally, much of the book is focused on American examples and many numbers are referenced. I presume a fact checker was hired to ensure their accuracy. I was not reassured after coming across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) misspelled three times (pp. 38, 98, 114)—and once even referred to as “Office for Economic and Cooperative Development” (p. 122)

Overall, Hursh provides an elegant, critically-framed analysis of the crises facing public schools in the United States. He presents alternative possibilities for those seeking to respond the crises, such as the opt-out movement (e.g., students opting out from participation in standardized testing, etc.), and proposes alternative ways of thinking about public education and society, including our relationship with the planet and its finite resources. Excerpts or even whole chapters of the book could be used for graduate-level instructional purposes (e.g., the section situating the current neoliberal reforms within classical liberalism, neoliberalism, and social democratic liberalism, (pp.1-8); and his articulation of the shift from government to governance, (pp. 36-45)). Not all chapters and examples found within the text will be of equal interest or utility to readers however, particularly readers outside of the United States. That said, the general themes and issues discussed within the text are relevant to all stakeholders concerned about the future of public education.

References

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