

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded our Schools

by Catherine Gidney

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That we live in a consumer culture is increasingly evident. That this is problematic for education is increasingly incontestable.

Building on the work of educational researchers Alex Molnar and Faith Boninger (2015), Deron Boyles (2018) in the United States, and Trevor Norris (2011) in Canada, Catherine Gidney's *Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded Our Schools* traces the history of consumerism and school commercialism in Canada throughout the 20th century, providing a historical account of how commercial interests influence schools to create new consumers and promote a positive image for themselves. There is a long history of intrusions by commercial interests into Canadian schools, and the book abounds with many vivid and shocking examples. We come to see Canada and its history through the eyes of its corporations: A history of consumerism in Canada is a history of Canada itself. Gidney demonstrates that while school commercialism is not entirely new it has certainly entered a new phase and developed new and troubling features.

It is important to consider the context in which the growth and legitimization of consumerism and school commercialism is taking place. The book reveals that a key cause is the decline of the welfare state in the form of reduced government funding to educational budgets, which created a growing funding crisis and pushed teachers, boards, and ministries to think ‘creatively’ and be ‘entrepreneurial’ in looking for new funding sources. A second cause is the growing power and legitimacy of large corporations. Whereas in the time period when the book begins, corporations were fairly small and geographically limited, too many corporations today have very loose and tenuous connections to any physical region, and are larger than many of the world’s countries. Today the advertising industry is comparable in expenditure and influence with education. In fact, one could argue that advertising has become the new educator, and that more money and psychological know-how is spent creating new consumers than educating new democratic citizens.

Chapter One, “Discriminating and Alert Teacher? The Early History of In-School Commercialism,” begins with the prevalence of school commercialism, the struggle to establish guidelines and regulations, and the early formation of a school system in Canada. Described as a partnership, these commercial relations were more often one-sided strategies to manage their image, and to align themselves with Canadian identity and history.

Chapter Two, “Education is Too Important to be Left to the Educators: the Rise of the School-Business Partnership” traces the rise—and normalization—of a growing intimacy between schools and businesses. The chapter explores how these partnerships developed, what kind of relationships they were, as well as the benefits and pitfalls, all set against the decline of the welfare state and emergence of neoliberalism.

Chapter Three, “Tapping the Educational Market: Computers in Classrooms” deals with attempts by companies like IBM to gain access to the classroom, to students, and the school board, and documents early attempts to connect schools through a forerunner of the internet. ‘Computers in classrooms’ is a challenging topic to write about. The game keeps changing: students carry pocket-sized computers far more powerful than anything in the school building just a dozen years ago.

Chapter Four, “It’s so Pervasive, it’s like Kleenex: Schools—the Last Frontier” describes the growing purchasing power of youth, especially for consumer goods. Examples include BMO setting up branches in schools and developing a board game for

students; the “Go Active!” initiative by McDonalds to promote an active lifestyle. The chapter also considers dissenting voices, those teachers, students, parents, community members, and journalists who identified incompatibilities between the aims and values of education and the aims and values of commercial interests.

Chapter Five, “Youth News Network, or ‘You’re Nuts to say No’: The Struggle over Classroom Commercialism” deals with the influence of Youth News Network, a “commercial venture to provide news programming in schools across Canada” (p. 88). Its mandatory inclusion of advertising is particularly problematic.

Chapter Six, “Building Brand Loyalty: Vending Machines, Fast Food Outlets, and Junk Food” addresses the ways in which makers of pre-processed foods sought to gain access to the youth market through influencing schools, boards, and teachers. This trend seems doubly problematic when we witness a crisis of obesity and diabetes.

Chapter Seven, “All we’re trying to do is Help Youngsters: the Politics of Raising Funds” explores the extent to which fundraising is portrayed as win-win, implying a great opportunity for community and parental involvement. The chapter argues that inequality is introduced between schools and school boards. Instead, fundraising often serves to perpetuate entrenched inequalities. Furthermore, fundraising takes away time, energy and resources from the classroom; already overburdened teachers and principals—and parents—are required to compensate for government underfunding.

My main critique would be that the book needs more analysis, commentary, and an exploration of larger questions these trends raise about education, politics, history and Canada itself. With the exception of some tentative comments in the final pages, the book is fairly dispassionate, or neutral, with little critical analysis. To put it in methodological terms: there is lots of rich “raw data,” but we need an analysis chapter. For example: what exactly is so bad about consumerism and school commercialism? There are occasional descriptions of resistance movements among teachers, parents, and the general public—but little explanation about what is opposed, or why. A reader whose starting point was that there is nothing wrong with consumerism, or that school commercialism is a good thing, or even a reader who was new to the topic and had no previously formed opinions, would struggle to see how education is impacted. However, that doesn’t detract from the value of the book. The book is a great starting point as a chronicle of these trends, and would be of great value to any scholar or student looking to learn more about the history

of consumerism and school commercialism in Canada—and how Canada’s educational history is linked to it.

References

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