

EDUCATION AND THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC VALUES

Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, & Public Education



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Preface and Acknowledgments

With all due respect to Charles Dickens, it appears to be the worst of times for public and higher education in America; public schools are increasingly viewed as a business and are prized above all for “customer satisfaction” and efficiency while largely judged through the narrow lens of empirical accountability measures. When not functioning as a business or a potentially lucrative for-profit investment, public schools are reduced to containment centers—holding institutions designed to punish young people marginalized by race and class. No longer merely tracked into low achieving classes, poor white, brown, and black youth are now tracked out of school into what is often called the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools have now become knowledge-stress centers for the privileged and zones of abandonment for the poor. Public school teachers are now viewed as the new “welfare queens,” while academics are defined less as critical intellectuals and engaged scholars than as a new class of professional entrepreneurs. At the same time, under strict policies imposed in a number of states by right-wing politicians wrapping themselves in the rhetoric of austerity, higher education at all levels is being radically defunded while simultaneously being transformed into a credentializing factory restructured according to the values, social relations, and governing practices of large corporations. In both public and higher education, ignorance is not merely fostered but embraced through course content whose value is almost exclusively defined through a metaphysics in which anything that can’t be quantified is considered useless. Corporate pedagogy has no use for criti-

cal thinking, autonomous subjects, stretching the imagination, or developing a sense of civic responsibility among students. Teachers who think and act reflectively, ask uncomfortable questions, challenge the scripts of official power, and promote a search for the truth while encouraging pedagogy as the practice of freedom are now viewed as suspect, if not un-American.

At the same time, amid all of the despair and foolishness on the part of right-wing politicians and conservative and corporate interests, it is not entirely clear that a spring of hope is beyond reach. As I write this preface, workers and young people are marching and demonstrating all over the globe against the dictates, values, and policies of a market-driven economy that has corrupted politics, pushed democracy to its vanishing point, and undermined public values. Unions, public school teachers, higher education, and all of those public spheres necessary to keep civic values alive are being challenged in a way that both baffles and shocks anyone who believes in the ideals and promises of a substantive democracy. In the United States, union-busting politicians such as Governors Scott Walker (Wisconsin) and Chris Christie (New Jersey) want to gut social services and sell them off to the highest bidder. They are not alone, but symptomatic of a political movement that wants to destroy the critical culture, dedicated public servants, and institutions that provide a sense of vitality, substance, and hope to public and higher education in the United States.

As the meaning of democracy is betrayed by its transformation into a market society, corporate power and money appear unchecked in their ability to privatize, deregulate, and destroy all vestiges of public life. America's military wars abroad are now matched by the war at home; that is, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have found their counterpart in the war against the poor, immigrants, young people, unions, public-sector workers, the welfare state, and schoolteachers. The call for shared sacrifices on the part of conservatives and Tea Party extremists becomes code for destroying the social state, preserving and increasing the power of mega-rich corporations, and securing the wealth of the top one percent of the population with massive tax breaks while placing the burden of the current global economic meltdown on the shoulders of working people and the poor. Deficit reductions and austerity policies that allegedly address the global economic meltdown caused by the financial hawks running Wall Street now do the real work of stripping teachers of their collective bargaining rights, dismantling programs long associated with social services, and relegating young people to mind-deadening schools and a debt-ridden future. Despair, disposability, and unnecessary human suffering now engulf large swaths of the American people, often pushing them into situations that are not merely tragic but life threatening. A survival-of-the-fittest

ethic has replaced any reasonable notion of solidarity, social responsibility, and compassion for the other. Ideology does not seem to matter any longer as right-wing Republicans have less interest in argument and persuasion than in bullying their alleged enemies with the use of heavy-handed legislation and, when necessary, dire threats, as when Wisconsin's Republican Governor Scott Walker threatened to mobilize the National Guard to prevent teachers' unions from protesting their possible loss of bargaining rights and a host of anti-worker proposals.

With any viable leadership lacking at the national level, both students and workers are watching the movements for democracy that are taking place all over the globe, but especially in the volatile Arab nations and in Western European countries such as France, England, and Germany. Struggles abroad give Americans a glimpse of what happens when individual solutions to collective problems lose their legitimacy as a central tenet of neoliberal ideology. Massive demonstrations, pitched street battles, non-violent gatherings, the impressive use of the new media as an alternative political and educational tool, and an outburst of long-repressed anger eager for collective action are engulfing many countries across the globe. In smaller numbers, such protests are also taking place in a number of cities around the United States. Many Americans are once again invoking democracy, rejecting its association with the empty formality of voting and its disingenuous use to legitimate and justify political systems that produce massive wealth and income inequality. Democracy's promises are laying bare the sordid realities that now speak in its name. Its energy is becoming infectious, and one can only hope that those who believe that education is the foundation of critical agency, politics, and democracy itself will be drawn to the task of fighting America's move in the last thirty years to a politically and economically authoritarian system.

At issue here is the need for a new vocabulary, vision, and politics that will unleash a new democratic vision capable of imagining a life and society free of the dictates of endless military wars, boundless material waste, extreme inequality, disposable populations, and unfounded human suffering. Central to *Education and the Crisis of Public Values* is the belief that no change will come unless education both within and outside of formal schooling is viewed as central to any viable notion of politics. If real reform is going to happen, it has to put in place a viable, critical, formative culture that supports notions of social and engaged citizenship, civic courage, public values, dissent, democratic modes of governing, and a genuine belief in freedom, equality, and justice. Ideas matter as do the human beings and institutions that make them count, and that includes those intellectuals both in and out of schools who bear the

responsibility of providing the conditions for Americans of all ages to be able to think critically so they can act imaginatively—so they can embrace a vision of the good life as a just life, one that extends the values, practices, and vision of democracy to everyone. Hopefully, this book will make a contribution to that project.

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