

Running Head: GLOBALIZATION AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

Globalization and Charter Schools

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Abstract

Education has always reflected the mode of production. "Globalization" is a new mode of capitalist production, capitalism in the age of electronics, with distinctive features and demands. Charter schools, as an education reform, reflect important threads within globalization. First, the reform of educational content and delivery is really a change to meet the needs of globalization for new skillsets. Second, charter schools are a form of privatization, which is an important feature of globalization's demand for new sites of valorization and profit. Third, the network form is an emergent property of globalization, which is expressed through attempts to break down the centralized public school system through charter schools. The debate around charter schools takes within the assumption of the supremacy of the market and the inevitability of globalization, leading to a set of limited or even false choices. For a real debate on education reform, one must move beyond the narrow confines of the terms of globalization.

Globalization and Charter Schools

The charter school movement in the United States has grown dramatically over the past 15 years, representing one of the most important contemporary education reform efforts (Dingerson, Miner, Person, & Walters, 2008). This movement has been controversial, with both sides of the debate marshaling a wide range of arguments (see, e.g. Rael, 1995; Manno, 2001; Saltman, 2007; Vail, 2008). As with many other emotionally-charged education issues like bilingual education or affirmative action, the real significance of the issue is not the form that it takes (bilingual education, charters, etc.), but the underlying content.

Charter schools, as well as issues like bilingual education or affirmative action -- in fact, most if not all of the issues in the "culture wars" in the United States -- are the surface turbulence of big, historical processes unfolding today. "Globalization" is a convenient and broad concept to describe those processes. Because charter schools are surface expressions -- forms -- of globalization, and not the substantive quality of globalization (its content), discussing the pros and cons of the form implicitly accepts the content -- the logic and imperative of globalization. This paper focuses on how the charter school movement in Chicago expresses the content of globalization. Once that point is won, then the debate over the many forms of school reform shrinks in the face of the really substantial question -- the nature of society itself.

Education in the United States has always mirrored broader processes taking place in society (Fraser, 2001; Spring, 2008). Whether it be education in Puritan 17th century New England or the 19th century frontier or the 1960s in the South, education as a social institution has been both an expression of social dynamics and an arena (even battleground) where the social process played out. There should be no surprise in this. Education is a necessary function of any society; it guarantees the reproduction of economic and social life. As such, it always serves the underlying mode of production of society. This is not to say that it *only* reflects dynamics within the dominant mode of production -- it is also a site where social struggle and change take place. Still, the important function of reproducing a mode of production suggests that the mode of production provides a fertile starting point for analyzing education at any

historical moment.

"Globalization" has been used to describe many aspects of a world processes today. For the purposes of this discussion, globalization can be understood simply as the form that capitalism takes in the technical environment of new electronic technologies, or even more simply, "capitalism in the age of electronics" (Davis, 1997; 2004). Although the roots of globalization extend back several decades, it began to take shape as a distinct form by the early 1970s, with the invention of the microprocessor, the abandonment of the old Bretton-Woods financial system, and the advent of modern electronic money markets. It has continued to mature and evolve over the past 35 or so years. As a form of capitalism, globalization shares the same dynamics as all forms of capitalism, namely that it is a system of private ownership of the means of production, where wealth is produced through the expropriation of surplus labor, and the primary goal of the agents of capitalism is the maximization of profit. However, as a phenomenon of the "age of electronics", capitalism takes on a special shape. Three threads of globalization are especially relevant to education.

The first thread of interest is the basic function of education as an important site of social reproduction. Because globalization is a distinct economic form, the reproduction of globalization requires certain skills, organizational modes, types of knowledge, expectations and outlooks. With the rise of globalization, especially since the 1980s, education needed to re-form to sustain and extend the new form of production. Globalization's requirements of education were evident in the "Nation at Risk" report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983):

Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading through the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system... Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the "information" age we are

entering. (p. 322)

The demand for workers capable of operating the new, technology intensive economy, especially in the "STEM" subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) has been one impetus for school reform (Spring, 2008).

A second thread of interest is bound up with the dynamics of electronics-based production within the capitalist system. As a labor-replacing technology, electronics creates unique problems for a system of production where labor is the ultimate source of profit. The spread of electronics throughout the economy forces the search for new sites of valorization. As a result, globalization tends towards the commodification of all aspects of life. Neoliberalism -- globalization's political response to the problems of valorization -- pushes this process along. One important dimension of neoliberalism is the shrinking of the public sector, to both lighten the burden of state regulation and taxes on business, and to create new sites of profit. And so previously public activities like education become sites of value accumulation where social resources and activities are turned into commodities through the neoliberal activity of privatization. Privatization implicitly recognizes the centrality and logic of the market. In this way of thinking, optimal solutions to problems can only be reached through the market -- the market knows best.

Another feature of electronics-based technology suggests a third thread of interest. Electronic technology has evolved towards devices that can cheaply communicate with each other. This technology feature has given rise to digital networks, and in parallel with this technological stratum, new organizational forms that take advantage of digital networks have arisen. The old, industrial form was vertical, hierarchical, bureaucratic. The new "network form" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2002) has flattened out the organization, it is horizontal, with knowledge and initiative distributed out to the nodes. This in turn suggests why a particular kind of skilled worker is demanded by modern enterprises -- "creative" workers, workers who can "think out of the box", show initiative and so on. These workers can function as intelligent nodes. The communication-intensive distributed network form of intelligent nodes is at odds with the top-down, centralized structure of the industrial model. With networks, monolithic structures tend to

atomize. This new structure -- more a possibility of the technological environment rather than of globalization per se -- has important implications for education.

These three threads -- new educational requirements, privatization, and the network form -- come together in the rise of charter schools. Charter schools are granted a charter by the state to provide education. The charter outlines the state's expectations, but the schools have flexibility in how to attain the charter's goals. Chicago Public Schools (hereafter CPS) publications describe charter schools as "independently operated public schools that are not subject to the same state laws, district initiatives, and board policies as traditional public schools" (CPS, 2008b). The tradeoff is more freedom for the charter schools in terms of union rules (charters are non-union and work for the charter operator), local community oversight (CPS schools are loosely controlled by Local School Councils, charters are not), and CPS curriculum mandates in exchange for "high levels of accountability" (CPS, 2008b). In this simple formulation, the three threads present themselves: new curriculum, delivered by non-public bodies, free of the constraints of the massive CPS organization to deploy a variety of educational strategies. Many Chicago charter schools have a particular focus or approach: "Lasallean" education; virtual classroom; architectural, engineering and construction focus; military academy; holistic, healthy living, and so on.

Under the CPS's Renaissance 2010 program, Chicago charters are required to be operated by a non-profit organization. However, "non-profit" only means that the distribution of revenues in excess of expenses is restricted. Non-profits can be de facto arms of for-profit businesses. In addition, the charter operator can contract with a private firm to actually run the school. While Chicago has closed 59 elementary and secondary schools since 2001 (Lendman, 2008), CPS has opened 51 charter and related "contract" schools. Charter schools have moved from the public sphere to the private sphere -- they have been privatized.

Whether charter schools are "a good idea", or "better" or "worse" than public schools is a useless argument. To enter into the argument means to accept current conditions as a failure of just the public school system, and not a broader systemic failure. Kenneth Saltman (2007) argues

that the chronic underfunding of public schools amounts to a manufactured crisis ("disaster capitalism" or "smash-and-grab capitalism") which sets the stage for privatization (of which charters is but one form) as the necessary solution. Market logic and rhetoric ("performance", "efficiency", "accountability", "choice") come to dominate the education debate. No Child Left Behind in general, and mandated standardized tests in particular, are the tools to quantify the manufactured school failure via the aggressive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

According to one study that Saltman cites, 85 to 95 percent of the schools in the Great Lakes Region are likely to have "failed" AYP goals by 2014, making them ripe for takeover and transfer to the private sector.

Charter schools are sometimes seen as a natural, even benign reform. As Manno (2001) describes them, charter schools are a "centrist idea." Some commentators saw charters as a progressive alternative around bureaucratic and conservative public school administrations (Dingerson et. al., 2008). In these and other cases, the decentralization and relative autonomy of the network form expresses itself. Charters provide flexibility and options, they can make decisions free of bureaucratic inertia. However, the network form in itself is neither progressive nor conservative -- it is merely a structure.

Another question, a fundamental question, about what education is for must be addressed. Saltman (2007) poses the options like this (where Renaissance 2010 is shorthand for Chicago's approach to charter schools):

Renaissance 2010 is imagined as a singular accommodationist reform within which students are to learn what is determined from above as important to learn so that they can "achieve" academically. Then, ideally this school achievement can be cashed in for work opportunities in the corporate-controlled economy later. This contrasts starkly with the democratic education ideals that seek to teach students to understand and theorize the problems facing their community that they experience so as to act with others to transform those conditions. Such community-based democratic

educational practices need to be guided by overarching democratic principles.

Democratic principles need to emphasize the relationships between claims to knowledge and political control, economic control, and cultural control. (p. 140 - 141)

While one could pose other educational ideals, the heart of his argument holds: what poses as "choice" in the charter school movement is really an acceptance of globalization and its market logic, and choosing among the choices the market allows. A true choice transcends the market, and acknowledges a much bigger universe that allows for many ways of thinking and being as a whole human being, not just a worker-consumer.

Reflection

This paper is an attempt to connect work that I have done previously on technology and globalization with the subject of education. While I favor the idea of small schools, experimentation, flexibility, innovation, creativity and so forth, I also believe in the idea of the public school. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive. I am sensitive to the poor showing of the public school system, the sluggish bureaucracy, the union top-heavy with outrageously paid executives who seem to be doing little for the rank and file -- the list could grow long. At the same time however, I agree with Saltman. It is too easy to get sucked into a debate where the terms of the debate preclude any real solution. I think the better first step is to step outside, and grasp the big processes at play, what I have lumped into the term "globalization."

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