

Imagining How to Break the Co-optation of a Consensus

A Response to “Imagining No Child Left Behind Freed from Neoliberal Hijackers”

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ABSTRACT

Given that I share, mostly, Eugene Matusov’s passionate concerns, picking on his vocabulary might appear pedantic. However, the issues involved in labeling political movements and, even more, political practices, can be fundamental and address the very grounds on which social analysis must stand. Briefly, I am concerned with the label *neoliberal*, particularly when it is used as an epithet and blinds us to actual processes. I end with some, perhaps optimistic, remarks about the rise of educational activities that are not already marked for measurement on any pass/fail scale.

GIVEN THAT I share, mostly, Eugene Matusov’s passionate concerns, picking on his vocabulary might appear pedantic. However, the issues involved in labeling political movements and, even more, political practices, can be fundamental and address the very grounds on which social analysis must stand. Briefly, I am concerned with the label *neoliberal*, particularly when it is used as an epithet and blinds us to actual processes. I understand that Matusov’s piece (2011) is polemical, but it is worth taking seriously. By eschewing this label, I suggest what else we might notice about the current situation—particularly the historical continuities and the rising challenges to schooling.

Matusov distinguishes between the neoliberal (bad) and the democratic (good). He quotes a list of politicians that is impressive in its breadth across the full political spectrum in the United States. In this list, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Bill Clinton, John Kerry, Edward Kennedy, and Barack Obama are bedfellows in talking about education in America and what “we” should do about it. I, too, am struck by a fundamental consensus, at all levels of the American polity on goals, definitions, imagined practices (policies), methods of assessment and accountability, as well as actual practices. When the time comes to imagine an iconic problem (why can’t Johnny read?), a solution (education), an institution (schools), the people responsible for carrying out the solution (teachers), and means to assess whether the problem is being dealt with (policies), then the debates focus on the details of the mechanisms, not on the

initial imaginative act, and the interlocking web (network) of institutions and peoples that has kept being reconstituted over the past two centuries.

This consensus, however, is not a new one, and we must face the historical continuities. Paradoxically, perhaps, Ronald Reagan was the last president to resist what we might call (with a bow to Eisenhower warning Americans about the “military-industrial complex”) the “educational complex.” Reagan tried, and failed, to abolish the newly established federal Department of Education, which continues to give ever more leverage to schooling. The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* made this department unassailable on the same grounds that continue to drive federal policy. The report starts with a very familiar preamble:

All children, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain

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the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

We could go back in time and read similar reports or speeches from Lyndon Johnson or Theodore Roosevelt. Myself, I would go back all the way to Horace Mann. In 1846 he wrote a long justification for the state responsibility to tax all citizens so that all children have access to free public schools. He summarized several familiar political, economic, and moral justifications for what he called the Free School:

1. *The general intelligence which [Free Schools] are capable of diffusing, and which can be imparted by no other human instrumentality, is indispensable to the continuance of a republican government.*
2. *An educated people is always a more industrious and productive people. Intelligence is a primary ingredient in the wealth of nations.*
3. *Vice and crime are not only prodigals and spendthrifts of their own, but defrauders and plunderers of the means of others. (1846/1957, pp. 61–62)*

Mann goes on to develop a more complex argument based on natural law and the rights of children, but the pattern of argumentation is already set around the three poles of (in modern parlance) political participation, human capital, and human development.

Critics from the world of schooling, including Mann, have always been most uncomfortable with the human capital justification for the Free School. In most of the 20th century, these critics would have blamed (international) capitalism rather than neoliberal globalization. But the overall debate among apologists, reformers, and critics has remained set. Through whatever transformations have occurred to Euro-America (from rural to industrial, from industrial to mass, onto postindustrial knowledge-based socioeconomic systems), the Free School has come ever more to dominate and to spread, in the aftermath of European colonization, around the world. Horace Mann's dream has been realized: the Free (state-funded and compulsory) School is now indeed ubiquitous. It is found everywhere, across the religions, economies, and political systems that continue to distinguish various parts of humanity. There is nothing particularly neoliberal (or capitalistic, or democratic, or socialistic) about the Free School.

But there can be something American, French, or British, about it. As the dream was realized, differences that do make quite a lot of difference have arisen. The Free School is also the product of the kind of cultural production that makes any institution historically specific. To stress the reality of such cultural production, R. McDermott and I write about the School America builds (1998), where Matusov writes about the neoliberal school. Our goal is to emphasize an evolving historical particularism that characterizes the debate as a whole and to de-emphasize this or that version of the classical arguments. In the apparent debate between the neoliberal and the democrat, I choose, in a phrase McDermott

borrowed from James Joyce, “one aneather” side (McDermott, R. & McDermott, M. 2010).

Whether to use the adjective *neoliberal*, *capitalistic*, *democratic*, or *American* for the Free School would not matter much if each label did not make us focus on only some of the overall mechanisms rather than on others. My sense is that even the most radical critics must face the tight connection between Democracy, the Free School, and the Innocent Child, particularly as it relates to the fight against birth privileges. Several times in the late 18th century, people gave away the formal privileges they had received through birth in various powerful speech acts, such as the one performed by the French nobility on August 4, 1789. But such constitutional acts have proven never to be quite enough. Again and again, critics, and even apologists, have pointed out that birth privilege remains powerful. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1977), with many others, have argued that the reproduction of class privilege may actually be the primary—though hidden—function of schooling. I prefer Matusov's suggestion that the Free School keeps being “hijacked,” or *co-opted*, to use a word with slightly different connotations.

How could that be the case when so much effort has been spent trying to prevent any such co-optation? To answer this question, I am convinced that we must investigate mechanisms rather than motivations. In any event, the motivations for the attempt to co-opt schooling for one's own purposes are not mysterious: What parents would not fight for their children, even if the means or outcomes may hurt other parents' children? What corporation would not lean on school people to get them to produce what (future employees) it needs? One problem with motivation analysis is that even “good” motivations can lead to systemic reproduction. This is why I, personally, would grant that Kennedy or Obama, and even Bush or Cheney, have the same overall goal and motivation that Matusov and I have. But people having the right motivations does not mean that they are right about means and processes. They are almost certainly wrong in relying on testing. America will not test itself out of all the achievement gaps that testing reveals. This is all the more certain since, as Matusov suggests by highlighting one property of all testing, it is testing itself that produces the gaps. In a recent book, Koyama (2010) explored other facets of No Child Left Behind to show its practical consequences for mayors, principals, teachers, and parents. We must push such analyses to trace more carefully the mechanisms and linkages that currently allow for co-optation. Then we will be able to make stronger cases for alternatives.

For one such alternative, Matusov looks at the American Disability Act and the practices it has spawned. This is an intriguing track to explore. It echoes an argument R. McDermott and I made (1995). It calls to mind a principle of usability in computer interface design: “a basic foundation of usability is that errors are not the user's fault; they are the system's (or designer's) fault for making it too easy to commit the error” (Norman & Nilsen, 2011). Users of the well-designed Free School would never fail—except that not failing children contravenes the Free School's function of fighting birth privilege by evaluating the merit of individual students, and by doing so independently of parents and

communities. Focusing on human development is all to the good, but schooling is also about discrimination in that a test is useless if 100% of a population passes it. School people, particularly those most uncomfortable with recent developments, often pretend that this discrimination function is not part of a kind of Faustian bargain they made when they accepted the responsibility of assessing, and publicly reporting (through grades and degrees), the merit of individual citizens before they enter full adult participation with the rights and privileges attached to the degrees. In exchange for a massive expansion of their pedagogical authority—in Bourdieu's sense, resources, numbers, and power—school people accepted the task of establishing in great detail that half of the population is below average in the performance of any task (learning how to read, teaching how to read, etc.) and, furthermore, that most people fail at the performance of many tasks, so that only a very small number can fully participate in top positions. School people then accepted the even more fateful responsibility of diagnosing why a person might fail, and then devising remediation, and then endlessly debating why this or that program is not remediating what is in fact an artifact of schooling itself. As R. McDermott and I argued (1998), in a world without schools, there are no school dropouts and no need to explain it. School people are thus caught in a catch-22 they will not escape until the credentialing function of schooling is separated from the function of developing individuals. The former is one a democracy does require. But this institution may not have to be a school.

Actually, we may be closer to this decoupling than we might imagine. The paroxysm of school-based evaluations, assessments of value-added teaching, bureaucracies for control, etc., can only, in the medium term, lead to radical skepticism. The electorate and its politicians will come further to doubt the wisdom of those who claim pedagogical authority over them. Many already do, and they are getting quite vocal. More will eventually notice that most education, even now, does not proceed through schools, particularly when it addresses the most significant issues in their lives—on matters, for example, of health, the environment, the arts and popular culture, new technologies, religion, etc. The media (including all aspects of the new information technologies) are probably already the most powerful educators—after the peer groups (parents, friends, etc.) that mediate access and interpretation. Al Gore, Oprah Winfrey, Sarah Palin (to mention emblematic and controversial figures), as well as a person's parents, spouse, children even, will always be more powerful educators about, say, global warming, than some half-forgotten high school teacher from whom one took a class ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty or more years ago. These mechanisms provide an education in which there indeed is no failure in the school sense and where self-assessed

ignorance leads to investigation, discovery, teaching. This is what I have called the “productive ignorance” (2008) that drives everyday life. These processes have been given even more power by new technologies. Even now, many attempts by school people to fail some (by telling them, for example, that *fat* should not be spelled *phat* or that they are wrong when they doubt global warming) are radically ignored—except perhaps by those institutions who use school-assessed success as a gatekeeping mechanism.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière (1987/1999) has argued that true “emancipatory” education must proceed from “ignorant school masters” who do not seek to inculcate into pupils (and then assess this inculcation) what they know but to prod people to figure out for themselves what they must learn (and teach each other) about some skill. This seems absurd—except that this is the way almost everyone in the late 20th century learned how to manipulate new technologies and how we keep learning anew as new software and hardware keep appearing.

If indeed the Free School becomes as peripheral in education as the “old” media is said to have become, some of our problems will become moot. But others will surely arise. Still, with Matusov I search for alternatives.

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