

Democracy & Education

Essential Reading on Education Reform Dynamics.

A Book Review of *Philanthropy, Hidden Strategy, and Collective Resistance*

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PHILANTHROPY, *HIDDEN STRATEGY, and Collective Resistance* (2019) bills itself as “a primer for concerned educators” and examines the history and current state of philanthropy in U.S. education. Written by Kathleen deMarrais, T. Jameson Brewer, Brigitte Herron, Jamie C. Atkinson, and Jamie B. Lewis, *Philanthropy* spans 10 chapters and would serve as an excellent supplementary text for courses focusing on the politics of education or philanthropy and education. Despite the book’s few shortcomings, we recommend *Philanthropy* as essential reading for anybody working on or interested in contemporary education reform dynamics.

Chapter 1 focuses on ideology and education and serves as an excellent primer on American neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and paleoconservatism, providing the historical background behind these movements and the role capitalism plays in each of them. It also examines how, despite the ideological differences within these movements, they all share the same goal of privatizing education. Of special note is the tables that dissect the official statements and language of the Republican and Democratic party platforms’ stances on education, examining them in minute detail.

Chapter 2 examines the conservative right and conservative philanthropists’ efforts to shape educational ideology, policy, and practice, with Chapter 3 serving as an update of Chapter 2 (itself written 13 years prior). Symbolically, the writing of Chapter 3 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Powell Memo, described as “the clarion call for wealthy conservative philanthropists to pool

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their resources in the form of the Philanthropy Roundtable,” which the authors claim transformed U.S. democracy “into an oligarchy ruled by a small group of wealthy capitalists” (p. 91). These chapters could have been combined with one another to streamline the reading. Four interconnected conservative strategies are examined, and historical examples are given: the development of conservative youth on college campuses, the advancement of scholars who can produce

conservative research in exchange for a pathway to government service jobs, the development of regional and state policy centers to advance these goals, and the development and expansion of conservative media outlets to promote the above strategies. The section on conservative media was shorter than we would have liked it to be, but to be fair, there is no shortage of material written about this topic from other sources.

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These two chapters also contain a detailed analysis of the U.S. tax codes that allow these foundations to exploit a variety of loopholes to get around political lobbying prohibitions. U.S. tax code makes for dry reading, but it is incredibly important to analyze in order to understand how these loopholes work and how to fight against them—and this book does an excellent job of shining a spotlight on a subject that is both essential and all too tempting to overlook. Perhaps future editions of this book could focus more or entirely on these tax issues.

Chapter 4 provides analysis on *Citizens United*, a benchmark in triumph for corporate oligarchies and the erosion of democracy in the U.S., along with how it impacts education. In addition to providing the historical background behind this Supreme Court decision, chapter four also features remarks by various Supreme Court justices about the case.

Chapter 5 takes the focus from the macro to the micro, looking at hidden strategies that are present at the state level promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). The authors attempt to unravel ALEC's byzantine membership structure, and connections to Pearson, the Kochs, ExxonMobil, Gates, General Motors, UPS, and many others are uncovered and examined. Despite the difficulty of finding records of ALEC's membership over time, this chapter also reveals the fact that it has over 1,800 individual supporters and includes 20% of Congress, eight sitting governors, and more than 300 elected officials. The trend of useful information continues in this chapter with a table of ALEC members, their roles within the organization, and their occupations and states. The chapter closes with suggestions on how to counteract ALEC. This message of praxis is the most important aspect of this book, which we touch on later.

Chapter 6 looks at the “war of ideas” in academia and is the most interesting chapter. It focuses on the strategies of the Charles Koch Foundation (CKF) to infiltrate the world of academia. A listing of higher education beneficiaries is provided, and the organization's goals to influence research, curriculum (of note is the desire to create a “morals and ethics” economics course featuring *Atlas Shrugged* as a textbook), and faculty hiring and firing are investigated. The chapter again closes out with important information on how to resist these strategies.

Chapter 7 is titled “Ideological and Philanthropic Bedfellows;” it examines how far-right and left-leaning organizations share the goal of dismantling public education via movements such as school voucher systems, charter schools, and attempting to deprofessionalize teaching via deskilling through programs such as Teach for America. Teach for America is also highlighted for the way it produces alumni who are often elevated to positions of political power, with various examples of individuals being given. The brilliant term “ideological laundering” is used to describe how two seemingly polar opposites of the political spectrum are working toward these same goals.

In addition to concrete examples, the sociological aspects of how the individual has been elevated over the collective good in education are examined. These social phenomena are very interesting, though a bit surprising to read next to solid real-world investigative journalistic efforts to track Teach for America alumni

who would go on to become politicians and policymakers as well as the money trail behind them. A separate chapter could have been devoted to a more in-depth analysis of these phenomena.

Chapter 8 looks at the media's role in shaping public discourse surrounding education and contributing to the “public education is failing” mantra that has been drilled into the public's subconscious since the Reagan administration's release of “A Nation at Risk.” The concentration and consolidation of media outlets have played huge roles in projecting this view, and they have been enabled in part by the efforts of right-wing philanthropic groups. Despite the media's efforts to manufacture a crisis in public education, it is interesting to note that people tend to view their local public schools as good but the overall system of public schools as failing. This chapter has a “Types of Misleading News” table that shows the type of news, characteristics, impact, and motivation behind them. This would provide an excellent foundation for a class project where students find examples of the various types of news described.

Similar to Chapter 7, Chapter 8 also mixes the concrete and philosophical. We would have liked for these social phenomena to have their own chapter devoted to them for a more in-depth analysis.

Chapter 9 is the most conspicuous in the book and is the weakest section. It looks at foundry10, a philanthropic organization focused on building school and community partnerships for education. This chapter was obviously intended to show an example of “good” philanthropic work in education, but we cannot help but view its inclusion with a bit of skepticism. This chapter is written by Lisa Castenada, one of the cofounders of the organization, and provides several short case studies. We do not doubt the organization's good intentions, but its inclusion stands out like a sore thumb, especially after almost 300 pages of dissecting various philanthropic organizations.

The final chapter, Chapter 10, is simultaneously the shortest and the most important chapter. As previously mentioned, examples of praxis are sprinkled throughout the book. This chapter collects them and looks at individual strategies educators can take to resist the efforts to defame and dismantle public education that have been documented earlier. Organized chapter by chapter, this collection is an essential resource for educators feeling overwhelmed and helpless in today's anti-public school climate.

Despite the minor critiques and potential areas for improvement mentioned previously, this book is an incredibly important resource for educators at all levels. Philanthropy in education is all too frequently hidden behind closed doors with the donors' true intentions obfuscated and working in their own best interests—rather than those of the public. The needs of the few are misrepresented as the needs of the many, further enabling an oligarchy to masquerade as a democracy. This text could easily serve as the centerpiece of an educational foundations course for future educators to familiarize themselves with some of the ulterior motives behind seemingly well-meaning philanthropic movements. Additionally, the message of empowerment via praxis throughout the book serves as a blueprint and provides resources for democratically engaged citizens to get engaged at the level of

grassroots activism for the purpose of holding policymakers accountable for their ceding power to the wealthy elite and to push policymakers to defend public education, one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy.

References

- deMarrais, K., Brewer, T. K., Herron, B., Atkinson, J. C., & Lewis, J. B. (2019). *Philanthropy, hidden strategy, and collective resistance*. Myers Education Press.