

Book Review

William E. Segall.
School Reform in a Global Society.
Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.

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As this is being written, world attention is focused on Wall Street. The “bail-out” of financial markets is crowding much otherwise important news off the front pages and the cable television news broadcasts. Political reputations are being destroyed or badly damaged. Accusations of incompetence, malfeasance or both are being bandied about, as Washington seems embroiled in a Hobbesian war of all against all. The prospects for stability in the immediate future are awful.

I am not alone in witnessing this mess without a firm opinion of what ought or ought not to be done. In the domain of smoke-and-mirrors economics, I am a novice. Not only do I not understand currency markets, credit markets and “derivatives,” but when dollar numbers in the hundreds of billions and even the trillions are at issue, my head starts to hurt and I entertain a certain nostalgia for bartering vegetables as the high point of economic theory and practice.

And what does this have to do with the book here under review?

Simply this: whatever we are to make of all of the extant disasters and threats of disaster that currently divert us from the enjoyment of art, music and our children, they are somehow linked. There are connections among the Wall Street meltdown, the energy crisis, the environmental crisis, the Middle Eastern crisis and the media mentality that places every serious public issue in the framework of a crisis. The connections extend to education and to the competing strategies and tactics of educational reform.

However the current problems are either resolved or escalate into hyper-crises or mega-disasters, one of the connecting rods is the ideology of neoliberalism. For the past several decades, the dominant mentality in the Anglo-American democracies, much of Europe and the “globalized” parts of Asia and the Pacific has been one that celebrates what are commonly called free markets. Governance and especially adequate public services have been slowed, stopped or reversed. Regulation of corporate behaviour in enterprises as diverse as petroleum, pharmaceuticals, food production and distribution and, of course, mortgage lending have been reduced or removed. Much talk of a high-tech, instant communication, global market place has followed and has been used to justify the abandonment of once popular dreams about what Americans called “the great society,” and slightly more modest Canadians labeled “the just society.”

Adding to the justificatory rationale have been the earnest efforts of educational innovators from pre-school to post-graduate institutions. Teachers have been urged to become “entrepreneurial,” student evaluation has become quantified, curriculum delivery has become technologically mediated and curriculum has been redefined as educational product to be marketed to student customers and adapted to market demands. Knowledge and such wisdom as remains available have been put in the care of an intellectual invisible hand, which crumples and disposes of any teaching and learning that does not have an immediate instrumental purpose and does not contribute to the learner’s marketable skill set.

Now, however, that it is plain that neoliberal thought, institutions and behaviour have not ushered in an era of uniform prosperity and social progress ably assisted by information technology and the principles of the “ownership” society, it is surely time to reconsider in what direction and in support of what principles and practices innovation should move should if it is to facilitate the restoration of educational initiatives dedicated to something more ennobling than bloated corporate profits and ballooning military budgets.

William E. Segall’s *School Reform in a Global Society* is one of the most compelling among a number of re-evaluations of the academic innovations that have put in place the agenda of corporate education around the world.

I started to warm to Segall’s exposition almost from the first page. A prominent element in his argument is the concern for the concept of ideology and the content of the several ideological themes and variations that contend for our support. “What’s in a word,” he asks, and proceeds to tell us clearly what terms such as liberalism (progressive social reform in the mode of the politics of John Stuart Mill and the economics of John Maynard Keynes, among a legion of others) and neoliberalism (the return to strong support for private ownership and a reduced role for government in the economy), conservatism (based on preference for tradition and social harmony rooted in deference to authority and skepticism about technology and progress) and neoconservatism (neoliberalism with an overriding concern for morality built on religious fundamentalism) mean, and why their definitions matter.

He then moves almost seamlessly from the hinterland to the heartland of educational principles and from hegemonic political economy to the postcolonial setting by discussing the initiatives of European and American learning and their implications for immigrants to industrial cultures at the periphery of modern capitalist development. His explorations and expositions are crucial, for if we do not know the meanings of the words we use, we will literally not know what we are talking about.

One of the most hideous aspects of neoliberalism is its neophilia, its love of newness and change. In the quest for increasingly fast-paced change, it is not only easy but almost required that we obliterate the past and live exclusively in the specious present. Segall does not let us get away with it. He provides a concise but comprehensive history of neoliberalism, tracing it back as far as the Protestant reformation and following its evolution through the mercantile era, Victorian England and on to the present. At each stage, he is careful to point out the links between European and indigenous populations as we (re)learn that globalization did not begin with the World-wide Web, but was initiated at the time of Columbus and has been apparent from the conquest of the Americas, through the slave trade and into the contemporary electronic spaceless

and borderless era of pixelized productivity and poverty. His explanations and explications are essential, for if we do not know our past, we will not so much repeat it but uncritically and unreflectively fulfill it.

In his broad treatment of educational reform, Segall rehearses the experience of other lands and cultures for the edification of Eurocentric theorists and practitioners. Mexican, Tanzanian, Indian and even Soviet experiments are examined and their successes and failures are explained and sometimes celebrated and at other times unceremoniously dumped in the historical dustbin of failed experiments. Along the way, however, we are reminded of the ideals and the accomplishments of reformers from Nyerere to Gandhi to John Dewey who may only have interrupted the rush toward worldwide neoliberalism, but who did so with some practical effect and whose concerns for the mental and physical well-being of people remain as reminders of what can be done and what should be done in schools and society at large.

There is much in Segall's book to prompt critical thinking across philosophies and geographies. *School Reform in a Global Society*, however, is not a self-contained narrative that mixes abstract concepts with decontextualized data to produce a cogent but conceptual argument. Segall intersperses his analysis with personalized accounts of those who are caught and caught up in the global social dynamic. With real people who have real names and real words to express their subjectivity in a world of uncontrolled objectivity, the human costs of integration into global society and the pursuit of global school reform is revealed.

Also contained in Segall's book is the persistent theme that education is always *for* something. There is always an agenda. Whether speaking of education for indigenous survival or the education of "mean middle managers," he manages to show how ideological assumptions and prescriptions infuse every formal and informal curriculum and are implicit in every pedagogy.

Segall stops short of setting up a crisis mentality, but he does not shy away from reporting on a schism. The finest traditions and aspirations of liberalism which involve individual enlightenment, liberty and dignity as the basis for public prosperity and progress have been largely eclipsed by the engines of crude competition and corporate domination. Any good sense of public space and community purpose has been subverted by the primacy of privatization and profit. It will take time and (dare I say it?) education, to reconstruct education as more than vocational training and ideological indoctrination. It will take even more to reconstruct social relations within and between communities and countries.

Of one thing Segall seems certain. The neoliberal project will fail. The question is whether we will be in a position to redeem ourselves or experience further disappointments, or worse. William Segall has given us much to consider and much to include as we encounter the dangers and the opportunities that are afforded by ... crisis.

About the Author

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