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# Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools by Kenneth J. Saltman

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## ARTICLE

**Smashed****A Review of Kenneth Saltman's *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007)**

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War and disaster define the contemporary experience in no small manner. This is not just because pervasive warfare inevitably produces disasters. Whether war is waged between nation-states or by nation-states on ideologies (e.g., war on terrorism), civilian populations (e.g., war on youth or war on the poor), or things (e.g., war on drugs), the disasters of war are now coupled, to an unprecedented degree, with disaster more generally and the increased awareness of the possibility of disaster. As we witnessed with the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 or the mass devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, disasters are natural--sometimes unexpected, other times predictable and avoidable. Disasters, as the world witnessed in the U.S. government's response to the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina or post-"mission accomplished" Iraq, can be human-made--inflicted on humans by other humans through a shrewd combination of political malice and government incompetence rather than overt warfare--and, for that reason, perhaps shock individuals and groups and destroy communities that much more incomprehensibly (Bauman, 2006).

Furthermore, attendant to the awareness of the increased potential of natural and politically-induced disaster is the intensified sensitization to the fact that one could be helpless in the face of disaster. Or, in the least, one might have to wade through disaster on one's own or in the company of others who are also wading through it all in their own individual ways according to the means they have individually garnered or assembled. This is, after all, the idea that the U.S. government and mainstream media have hammered home for nearly 30 years now—in material ways through crafting policies that effectively abort mutualistic bonds and collective insurance against individual misfortune (e.g., Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996—"welfare reform") or by symbolical means through the persistent derision of social support as a kind of moral turpitude (e.g., the *Survivor* syndrome): We are all individuals, and we all have equal opportunity to rise or fall according to our individual merit and the choices that constitute it. If only life were actually so simple or simplistic.

Milton Friedman (1982) wrote in the "Preface" to the reprint of his notoriously influential *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), one of the key operations manuals for the neoliberal/neonconservative revolution in the U.S.:

Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (ix)

One might add this to Friedman's recommendation: "And if a crisis, actual or perceived, fails to materialize, then one should be induced" (e.g., "shock and awe"). Here, Friedman, the ardent critic of the alleged "social engineering" impulses of bleeding-heart liberals, recommended no less than the social and cultural engineering of the "free market" by way of crises--or, in the more contemporary lexicon, disasters—that open opportunities for corporate elites to cajole the government into deregulating public goods and services by turning their provision, maintenance, or destruction over to corporate bodies. And, for this reason, disasters now register an unfathomable level of insidiousness because they are not only politically leveled on unsuspecting populations when they do not happen according to natural means, but they are also induced/used strategically to reallocate wealth and

opportunity, adding the proverbial insult to a compendium of preexisting social, political, and cultural injuries associated with systemic poverty and structured racism. The short life of what some observers called “predatory” or rapacious capitalism in the 1990s has quickly entered its new phase, “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007; Saltman, 2007).

Disaster capitalism signals hard times for public schools, and, by consequence, democratic public life—locally, nationally, and globally. Kenneth Saltman unflinchingly demonstrates why and how in his important new book, *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* (Paradigm, 2007), which is constituted by case studies of privatization efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans, post-invasion Iraq, and post-decades-of-disinvestment-and-resegregation Chicago.

For Saltman, each case is not only related but also emblematic of much wider, concerted attempts to “take and break public schools” by way of “smash and grab privatization” (p. 5). Smash and grab privatization is a term Saltman coins to identify what’s new about efforts to redefine the public sector, in particular public schools, in the image of an unfettered market and the interests of corporate and political elites with global imperial ambitions. While public schools have been subjected to a range of deformations in recent years such as hyper-commercialization (Giroux, 2000; Molnar, 2005), choice, charter and voucher schemes, and intensified militarization and criminalization since the early 1990s (Robbins, 2008; Saltman and Gabbard, 2003), hyper-commercialization, militarization and criminalization were the only efforts that gained significant political traction until recently. Vouchers, for instance, were pushed unsuccessfully for years “until the autumn of 2005” when they “capture[d] the Washington, D.C., public schools with the largesse of Congress,” as Saltman points out (p. 4). Smash and grab privatization fundamentally alters the dynamics involved in contests over the future of public schooling: Smash and grab privatization circumvents the superficially deliberative and legislative channels that even militarization and criminalization followed (e.g., Troops to Teachers, 1994; Gun-Free Schools Act, 1994; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), and instead uses the coordinated power of politicians, right-wing think tanks and their organs, and large business groups to restructure public schools in the event of natural and politically-induced disasters (pp. 2-3). Smash and grab privatization operates according to the logic of “accumulation by dispossession,” or the production of profit and concentration of wealth by what can go by few other titles than theft—theft of resources, public schools and services, in this case (pp. 7, 78-79, 99).

The late Friedman, true to form, celebrated the myriad consequences of Hurricane Katrina as an opportunity to permanently reform New Orleans public schools as a constellation of charter schools strung together and supported by the most expansive voucher scheme to date (Klein, 2007). Friedman’s capitalist wet dream of disastrous opportunity in the Gulf was touted equally as ecstatically by local politicians and business people who saw in the social, political, and economic storm that followed Hurricane Katrina “golden opportunities” and “silver linings” for engineering New Orleans Public Schools according to a market model (Saltman, p. 25). Some observers even talked about the golden opportunities in only thinly masked racist or social “hygiene” terms of “wiping the slate clean” (p. 27). As Saltman indicates throughout, but with particularly disturbing detail in his case study of post-Katrina New Orleans schooling (and with his later analysis of the Renaissance 2010 plan in Chicago), these “golden opportunities” of smash and grab privatization obviously operate unevenly, targeting the schools and communities that are already subjected to the disasters of structured racism and class oppression before a natural disaster hits.

Consider some of the “clean-up”: The 4000+ member teachers union was dissolved. Along with that, traditional modes of public administration and oversight, damaged though they were in New Orleans and elsewhere, have been jettisoned as a result of the voucher and charter scheme where corporate models dominate all aspects of school administration and process, resulting in authoritarian forms of management that, in addition to other things, have promoted “shoddy hiring practices” and intensified

a pre-existing trend of putting squeezes on teachers to do “more with less” (Saltman, p. 58). This experience is common, Saltman says since, at the time of his writing, “[a]ll but 15 of the 117 [schools] were taken over [by the state], and all but one are operating as charter schools” (p. 49).

Compounding the many problems associated with the restructuring of New Orleans Public Schools is graft and backpedaling operating at the federal level. Consider just two of the many examples Saltman analyzes: 1) No-bid contracts were given via FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security to Akima, an Alaskan firm with direct links to former Department of Homeland Security head Tom Ridge, to provide portable classrooms at more than double the price for which a local firm could have done the job (p. 46). 2) Federal emergency aid in the form of the Hurricane Education Recovery Act (HERA) was made available to 49 states (p. 36). The catch, as Saltman explains, is that considerable portions of these funds have been spread to other areas of the country--to mask the disasters the current administration has produced by massively under-funding its self-heralded education plan, NCLB. At the same time, HERA and Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations Program (IARSOP) prohibit the use of the allocations to “rebuild the public schools themselves” in New Orleans (p. 37). Without schools, many residents have little impetus to return. With the construction of particular types of schools run by particular groups, particular groups of people can be enticed to return. Chillingly, when the politics of school reform in New Orleans are seen in relation to reconstruction efforts more generally in New Orleans, this seems to be a concerted and strategic attempt to wipe not only New Orleans Public Schools’ slate clean, but the entire city’s (pp. 37-39), “while creating lucrative opportunities for the most well-off” (p. 23). So much for a “free market.”

Saltman’s tenacity for unraveling the neoliberal rhetoric and cultural politics that promote disaster capitalism can be seen in his chapter on post-mission-accomplished Iraq. Saltman specifically evaluates the role Creative Associates International, Inc. (CAII), might be playing in “democracy promotion” in light of the company’s history of participating in U.S.-supported coups in Nicaragua and Haiti. While having the opportunity to rake in upwards of \$200 million for its efforts in Iraq, what might “democracy promotion” mean for CAII? Among other things, Saltman suggests the following: First, it involved receiving a bid by way of “eva[ding]...bidding protocol” (pp. 99-100). Second, it involved a textbook racket that, given the immense difficulty involved in constructing curriculum in a war-torn country, seems to have done little more than delete references to Hussein and the Baathist party and scuttle \$10 million from USAID to UNESCO (pp. 102-103). Third, CAII’s second contract for democracy promotion work involved supporting the development of “private-public” partnerships—or the conversion of Iraqi public schools to a charter model, one of the key components of the domestic NCLB (pp. 106-107).

Consequently, Saltman sums up CAII’s democracy promotion as being more “about the international involvement of corporations in education” (p. 70) and the use of education to boost the interests of global capital and imperial ambitions than the relationship between schooling and popular democracy. This becomes an even more convincing conclusion to draw, especially when the basic needs of students and communities have gone miserably under- or unaddressed (p. 106). Additionally, CAII, per the recommendation of USAID, has been resistant to information requests regarding its performance in Iraq, a particularly telling aspect of its democracy promotion efforts and just a minor contradiction of the Bush administration’s domestic emphasis on “accountability” (p. 100).

Saltman’s warning that concerned citizens and educationists would be mistaken to isolate “the struggles for the fate of U.S. urban schools...from the motives for war on the Middle East...” (p. 111) is not merely founded on the assumption that persistent war diverts monies, common resources, and social energies from domestic public goods. In what might prove to be one of the clearest explications I have seen on the “glocal” or “lobal” complex (Saltman does not use these terms), Saltman unravels the link between overt warfare and smashing of public goods “over there” and the breaking of public

schools (and communities) “here” in his study of Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 plan and its relationship to NCLB. This is because the cases of school privatization in Iraq and New Orleans, Saltman argues, are not isolated or “exceptional.” Rather, the Renaissance 2010 model further demonstrates the ways in which the general production of “disastrous public school conditions” is a precondition for “declaring public schools as ‘failed’ and ripe for privatization” (p. 120).

Formulated by the Commercial Club of Chicago (Saltman, p. 125), Renaissance 2010 is an elaborate re-urbanization or slate-cleaning scheme. The scheme is constituted by two related processes: the replacement of public housing with privately developed, mixed-income communities and new development that falls under the catchword of “urban renewal,” and the closing of public schools that served children who resided in nearby public housing, which is then followed by the reopening of select schools as charter schools that serve the children of the middle- and upper middle classes (pp. 129-130). The collateral casualties of this scheme are students who are poor and generally of color being forced to attend other schools in disastrous conditions, just awaiting their closure and reconstitution—a process that is even more likely as those schools, as a *caveat* of NCLB, are required to meet consistent annual yearly progress (AYP) without requisite investment in resources, staffing, and infrastructure (p. 126). At the same time, the schools that open in the mixed-income communities are, in some cases, exempted from open-enrollment protocol, and thus can have student bodies handpicked from the gentrified neighborhoods.

Saltman rightly points out an interesting reversal of historic trends: As poor people of color are dispersed to neighboring suburban or ex-urban communities, well-off whites are lured back to the city center while public schooling, in the process, is handed over to corporate interests. The wider consequences of this strategic, systemic disinvestment potentially reach far beyond Chicago, given that studies with even “generous assumptions” have indicated that upwards of 90% of public schools in the Great Lakes region could be deemed “failed” by 2014 (p. 126). This, if efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans are not telling enough, demonstrates most clearly how the smashing of public schools is a process designed to not only embolden neoliberal/neoconservative interests and power, but to also reinforce, if not intensify, racial and class hierarchies, as the students and communities most in need of investment are strategically targeted for intensified disinvestment.

It is quite evident that Saltman possesses considerable skills in puncturing the Orwellian rhetoric of neoliberalism and detailing the social and historical relationships that give it resonance, and he astutely maps the many complex relationships between the key players in disaster capitalism and those who suffer its most egregious tendencies. Though, as Saltman adequately demonstrates, the vast majority of us suffer—even if unevenly—from disaster capitalism in the currency of unnecessary suffering (for others’ profit), loss of basic control over fundamental aspects of everyday life and schooling, and the persistent dissipation of public spheres in which we could reconstitute formative social bonds and develop civic agency in the interests of a critical, participatory democracy. For these reasons alone, the book should be read widely; Saltman’s critique moves beyond a staid follow-the-money treatise on domination. But for these reasons alone, Saltman’s book could also be titled, *Smashed: A Broken Public’s Consequences on Schooling*. If democracy were not already imperiled to an unbelievable degree by hyper-individualism, insatiable greed, and egregious social and economic inequality, then it is possible that the dense, anti-democratic tendencies of the contemporary political economy would exert less power than they have in recent years.

Given the breadth, depth, and clarity of this particular study, and the fact that it fits into and expands on an already impressive body of work, Saltman should be given some latitude. Regardless, this reader has a minor criticism of and slight, personal disappointment with the book. Though Saltman clearly understands the substantive differences between deregulation and decentralization, he seems to use the terms interchangeably in his second chapter (pp. 107, 109-110). Considering his grounded and

impassioned calls for political autonomy, this slippage could be confusing for some readers. Deregulation is regulation by other means, or, as Stuart Hall (1997) explains, “re-regulation” (p. 230). With deregulation, power is transferred from moderately (or potentially) accountable government agencies to largely unaccountable corporate bodies (for the production of profit). Decentralization, alternately, involves the devolution of effective power, control, and resources to local, public entities. In this case, decentralization can be seen as a fundamental aspect of participatory democracy, whereas deregulation seems to be a constitutive element in and consequence of privatization. This, apparently, is what Saltman is getting at when he says that the smash and grabs in New Orleans, Iraq, Chicago, and elsewhere are instances where “federal and state power is being used to radically localize control over schooling yet in ways that do not increase local democratic control” (Saltman, p. 51) because the control, while operating locally, is maintained by corporate groups, not citizens.

Saltman clearly centers public schooling as “site and stake” in the struggle for democratic public life. By naming public schools a site in democratic struggles, Saltman centers the idea that they are crucial spaces and places in and through which democratic relationships and languages can—and need to—be fostered. Stake, here, indicates that public schools are also one of most critical institutions on which a project of democratization must wage its efforts, given the deformations of other institutions such as the media and public space at this point in history. His concluding chapter is inspired and inspiring. Appropriating insights from state policy in Israel’s early years, Saltman provides an appealing alternative to the smash and grab politics of disaster capitalism (159). He encourages citizens concerned with the viability of public schools and, subsequently, of democracy, to “make facts on the ground.” This entails a range of actions whereby citizens effectively reclaim control over public schools and public life and alternately memorialize, celebrate, and institute the struggles of democratization. This is important because if citizens fail to be educated in ways conducive to democratic public life and consequently fail to materialize democratic social relationships in institutional forms, then we are left with no memory of what could be. As the late Pierre Bourdieu (1998) explained, before public schools (and other agencies of the common good) are smashed, they represent the “trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past” (p. 2), both paying homage to past democratic efforts and providing the means to improve—democratically—upon them. With Saltman’s brief elaboration of this political vision and its viability, one gets the sense that Saltman is as adept at mapping the possibilities of democratic social transformation through the process of education as he is at critiquing the forces that are destroying it and its conditions of possibility. A minor problem for this reader is that, even considering Saltman’s gripping analyses and narrative, it almost feels as if he lays out the canvas and a compass for mapping democratic opposition—then, closes the book. But, perhaps, this is the point: Once concerned citizens have an adequate sense of the site and stake of public schooling at this time, it is really in democracy’s interest for individuals and groups to construct their own facts on the ground after making and mapping the territory themselves.

In various interviews about her book on disaster capitalism, Naomi Klein has said that one of her goals was to help people take heed of Friedman’s recognition of the power of crises (or disasters) to provide opportunities for making “the politically impossible politically inevitable” (Friedman, 1982, p. ix). She suggests that this would help people develop and have ideas “lying around” when the next disaster happens, so they can protect their common goods and interests. Saltman’s study of the impacts of disaster capitalism on public schools and democracy helps us immensely in this regard. It is a courageous and hopeful antidote for the fear and cynicism so central to emboldening rapacious greed and concentrated power. The question is not whether disasters are likely; the question is whether we, like Saltman, will have the courage to oppose political disasters—concomitant to natural disasters or not—and the imagination to develop and implement democratic alternatives to them.

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