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Public Education in Neoliberalism’s Second Wave: A Review of Alexander J. Mean’s Schooling in the Age of Austerity: Urban Education and the Struggle for Democratic Life

Review by LaJuana Davis*


In Schooling in the Age of Austerity: Urban Education and the Struggle for Democratic Life, Professor Alexander J. Means (Department of Social and Psychological Foundations of Education at SUNY–Buffalo State College) presents a critical ethnography of a Chicago high school and its neighborhood to chronicle the impact of neoliberal reforms and austerity measures on a public education system. Means makes no secret of his position on the ills of American schooling—including privatization of public education, attacks on teachers as lazy and incompetent, and the standardization of curriculums—and what he believes is the cause: neoliberal marketplace rationales driven by individual utility rather than collective good. Schooling in the Age of Austerity also critiques the current state of racial and economic balkanization and disinvestment in public education that he argues those neoliberal reforms caused. Through spirited, pointed writing, Means shows that the public education reform movement has shown little measurable progress in closing achievement gaps of black and Latino students, but nonetheless continues to divert millions in public funds from the children who need it most. The narratives

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2. See id. at 4–8, 16–35.
3. See id. at 23–35.
4. See id. at 16–35.
that Means employs throughout the book illustrate that the costs of education reform takes away from the collective good to private, market-driven, and individualistic values. Means makes a persuasive case that the approach has not markedly improved real wages, educational opportunities, or wealth distribution for the families of Chicago’s public school students.

I. The Contemporary Educational Reform Movement and the Crisis of Human Security

Neoliberalism has influenced thinking about public education for a long time, but it has only risen as a dominant hegemony in education the last thirty years. As applied to public education, neoliberalism would apply a core hypothesis of the competition/consumer choice model: financing public education produces a more capable workforce that will allow the United States to better compete in the world economy. Neoliberal theory anticipates that rational consumers in a free market will identify the most competitive and efficient school model (public, private, or charter), and thus drive out inferior forms of education. Neoliberalism posits that the free market will be better at identifying quality instructors and teaching methods to best prepare students to succeed in the global marketplace. Beyond paying for the choice system through tax credits, scholarships, and vouchers, neoliberals reason that government interference in the business of education should be kept to a minimum.

This neoliberal view of education starts where the U.S. public education system did at its birth: building better workers. Assuming that we want education to substitute as job training, the rub is that economists tell us that the jobs that will be available to today’s schoolchildren as adults will be low-skilled and low-wage ones. While neoliberal theory assumes that the “consumers” of public education, and their parents, have the resources to choose based on accurate measurements of education quality, cost remains an uncertain measure of quality in a free public education system.

In making the case for neoliberalism’s damaging effects on public education, Means rightly does not lay the blame on any particular faction in the U.S. political spectrum: Democrats, Republicans, liberals, and conservatives have played a part in public education’s current state. The forces supporting neoliberal education

5. See, e.g., id.
9. Id. at 28.
10. See, e.g., id. at 26.
reform, Means argues, are a powerful blend of politicians, free market theorists, and corporate educational entrepreneurs who have convinced the public that its education system is failing and cannot be improved in its current condition. For this blend of forces, teardown is the only solution.

II. CHICAGO AS AN OPTIMAL SETTING FOR A STUDY OF NEOLIBERAL SCHOOL REFORMS

America’s second city is an auspicious place for Means’ study for many reasons, chiefly because it is the intellectual hub of American neoliberalism (both Friedrich Hayek, who wrote a leading text of neoliberal thought, *The Road to Serfdom*, and Milton Friedman, a leader of the Chicago School of economic theory, were based at the University of Chicago). Chicago has also influenced the major federal education policy initiatives of the last two decades. In 1995, Illinois passed the School Reform Act that turned administrative control of the Chicago Public Schools over to then-Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. Daley and his staff instituted high-stakes testing, retention policies for children who did not pass reading and math tests, and other measures that preceded and inspired the measures in the 2007 No Child Left Behind Act (the Elementary and Secondary Education Act). Thus, it is no accident that Chicago has been at the forefront of the most recent wave of neoliberal school reform policies, as advanced by current Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel and former Chicago Schools CEO Arne Duncan (2001–2009), now U.S. Secretary of Education in President Barack Obama’s administration.

A unifying theme of Professor Means’ ethnography of Chicago’s Carter High School and Ellison Square neighborhood is human security. The concept of “human security” has emerged to become a central premise of international relations and diplomacy. Human security is the premise that individual welfare is critical in assessing state security—and that security for individuals extends beyond a state’s ability to meet military or external threats. In the twentieth century, international organizations realized that most individuals are more likely to face threats

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11. *See, e.g.*, id. at 28–29, 43.
from within their nations than from external forces. Threats or insecurities to physical, mental, economic, and environmental well-being are more salient to individual welfare than national security, even if regarded as less important.  

While international diplomacy has recognized a basic human need for security, the concept of human security has largely been absent in educational discourse in the United States. In keeping with the expanded concept of human security, Means pushes beyond post-9/11 definitions, which are focused on national security, to instead examine human insecurity in the lives of Chicago schoolchildren and their communities. In the fall of 2013, the crisis of human security for schoolchildren was quite literal after Chicago closed 50 schools in the summer of 2013, requiring students to travel to new schools through unfamiliar and dangerous streets. To do that, Chicago created Safe Passage routes with escorts to school, reminiscent of the National Guard escorts for schoolchildren in post-\textit{Brown v. Bd. of Education} school desegregation. However, Chicago’s recent school escorts were not forging the way for children to an equal place in society, but merely guiding the children so they could arrive at school without being shot.

However, Means places much of students’ insecurity on the policies of the Chicago Public School system (CPS) itself. CPS considers itself at the forefront of “new surveillance and crime control paradigms of security and discipline.” The city implemented a crime control environment in the city’s schools after a spate of gang violence and a fatal shooting in 1992 in the hallway of Chicago’s Tilden High School prompted Illinois’ 1995 School Reform Act. The reform allowed Chicago’s mayor to take-over the CPS, and in the years since the last reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in 2007, ever more punitive and polarizing policies that affect race, class, and space have been introduced into public education. The metal detectors, zero-tolerance, and school search policies that Means describes resemble prisons more than places of learning. While the unsettling effect that surveillance and police policies have on students is documented through their

18. \textit{See, e.g.,} MACFARLANE \& KHONG \textit{supra} note 14, at 1–2, 11–14.
21. \textit{Means, supra} note 1, at 44.
24. \textit{See, e.g., Means, supra} note 1, at 37, 59.
narratives in the book, the effects of these policies cannot be fully known. The Chicago police told Means that it does not track student detentions or arrests by police districts or by schools, a rather disturbing failure of transparency.\textsuperscript{26} The lack of data to support the efficacy of the school system’s policies is a common thread throughout Means’ time in Chicago. The limited data means, however, that his broader points are based on observations and interviews of about thirteen students and twenty-five teachers in a single school. In fairness to the author, institutional barriers, in this case the school system, are responsible for the limited data set: it restricted Means’ access to its students and teachers in a back-and-forth a process that he amusingly compares to a scene from Kafka’s \textit{The Trial}.

\textbf{III. AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHICAGO’S CARTER HIGH SCHOOL}

Means intentionally focused on one school that would allow him to collect deeper empirical narratives about the effect neoliberal policies have on the understanding of public education. Chicago’s Ellison Square neighborhood and Carter High School (CHS)—where Means ended up conducting his study—seem broadly representative of public education in many American cities: with a majority-minority after racial and middle-class flight.\textsuperscript{27} CHS is in a predominately Latino neighborhood that also draws students from surrounding historically black areas; the city school system is 85\% minority and 87\% low income or below the federal poverty line.\textsuperscript{28}

Means’ ethnography is “openly normative” and he acknowledges early in the book that his positionality impacts his interpretations.\textsuperscript{29} Reading the book as a non-expert, I might have come away with the impression that the ethnography was only tangential to Means’ critique of neoliberalism and public education and that he might have written the same book without stepping a foot in Chicago. However, Means’ description of the jail-like conditions of the school\textsuperscript{30} would have been impossible without seeing and feeling the impact of law enforcement’s presence on the schools’ students and teachers. CHS’ missing ceiling tiles, visible rusty plumbing, red disciplinary trailers (the color scheme that jails use for combative or high-risk prisoners), the armed police, and airport x-ray screeners will be familiar to those who have visited detention centers. Means’ presence is also critical for his description of the effects of the high-stakes testing movement.\textsuperscript{31} The part of the

\textsuperscript{26.} \textsc{Means, supra} note 1, at 100–01.  
\textsuperscript{27.} \textsc{Means, supra} note 1, at 10.  
\textsuperscript{28.} \textit{Id.}  
\textsuperscript{29.} \textit{Id.} at 9.  
\textsuperscript{30.} \textit{See, e.g., Means, supra} note 1, at 37, 59.  
\textsuperscript{31.} Through his conversations with the students and staff, Means saw how corporate education providers have profited from the reform movement. In a scenario better suited for the satire of a television sitcom, an educational consulting firm headed by a hedge fund manager convinced the Chicago Public Schools to purchase a plan to contribute to the “Culture of
testing movement that brands schools, like CHS, as failing also taints its students and staff. Means could not have captured from afar the sense of insecurity that permeates the school created by the “hourglass economy,” violence, and pervasive unemployment. As one teacher tells Means, “It’s deeper than despair. We’re talking about all-out failure and disbelief. How do you live without belief?”

IV. RESTORING BALANCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION DISCOURSE AND POLICY

In Schooling in the Age of Austerity, Means sees the antipathy against public education as a cynical but ruthlessly effective public relations effort to transfer public funds into private hands with little accountability to taxpayers or school districts. Considering that most Americans went to public school and think that their own children in public schools are receiving a good education, the rising antipathy against public education and its teachers is perplexing. The problem is not that public schools are hopeless but that the public has been inundated with such vitriolic messages against them that eventually we began to accept those messages as truth. Such messages are perceived as accurate even in the face of contrary evidence about how much public education contributes to the public good and what this country might look like without it. One author explains the problem as one of disengagement from public discourse leaving the only people to speak in the public square “a small coterie of activists, of all stripes, with axes to grind, pushing out those remaining few who would pursue the common good.” Far from representing a recommitment to quality and equality, Means argues that the current hyper-fragmented and punitive state of public education is set to rollback the progress made in the previous century.

Means’ picture of how private and political interests at both ends of the political spectrum have joined to destabilize public school systems paints a grim
future for public education. The perception of public education is heading toward the same derisive attitude reserved for social welfare programs in the 1990s, particularly by those who do not acknowledge that familial social class and fortuity has as much to do with one’s life outcomes as intelligence and hard work. The reason for that dichotomy, Means suggests, is that when resources contract in an “hourglass economy,” insecurity causes class protectionism. The wagons circle around resources for kids who we think have a chance—high-performing, upper and middle class kids—and drain resources from kids who we perceive have less of a chance at success—those left behind in urban public schools. No other rationale would explain emerging reforms in which money is taken from public schools to pay for vouchers and tax credit scholarships for private schools, which by definition have no particular responsibility to act for the public good. In fact, neoliberal reforms have yet to answer the “primary[] question in any structural change to education[—]whether it serves the public good.” Rather than confront that truth, a more palatable political message for upper and middle class voters is to vilify public education while creating a way out for middle class children whose families cannot or do not want to pay full freight for private school or whose families cannot afford to live in the upper-class enclaves where the “good” schools are. To justify the resulting inequity for the children left behind, the public discourse focuses on how those children are undeserving of public funds. High-stakes testing and the specter of violent kids mark students in urban public schools as undeserving of education because of bad genes, bad choices, and bad behavior, rather than being affected by the political choices and an economic structure that conspire to maintain a permanent underclass. Means notes that neoconservative discourse encourages this picture of failing schools as the product of moral failings that stem from pathology and dependency.

Fashioning a message of promise from Means’ ethnography of a neoliberal public education system is a daunting task. The idea of public education as part of the common good has been diminished, as parents of schoolchildren are exhorted to “pull triggers,” flee failing schools, and demand school choice. The language...

38. See id. at 26–27.
39. See id. at 4, 21–23.
40. See, e.g., id. at 61–62, 66.
41. See id. at 28, 61.
42. Derek W. Black, Charter Schools, Vouchers, and the Public Good, 48 Wake Forest L. Rev. 445, 446 (2013). Professor Black notes in his article that “a strong argument can be made that the primary justification for public education is the societal interest. Society accrues significant economic, cultural, and democratic benefits from an educated citizenry and suffers enormous costs if the general population is educationally deficient.” Id. at 451 (footnote omitted).
43. See, e.g., id. at 61–62.
44. For examples of Means’ discussion of these issues, see id. at 19, 26–27, 68.
45. Id. at 68–69.
of education reform has become a language of separation and the result, a further entrenchment of segregation. To restore that notion of common good and belief in improving public education, Means proposes five counters to neoliberal reforms: (1) establishing a second bill of rights that creates a right to human security; (2) re-claiming public education from those who seek to convert it to “a cheap, union free, and for-profit system[;]” (3) reinvesting in communities using funds recaptured from corporate tax loopholes and corporate welfare; (4) reforming commercialized standardized curriculums driven by marketplace utilitarianism for ones which incorporate social values and culture; and (5) creating more opportunities for schools to connect with people in their neighborhoods. In this way, Means’ ethnography manages to provide practical ways of seeing public education as a common good. The key in the struggle to create inspiration from the bleak deficit of hope in urban public school systems is to restore the nation’s commitment to universal education.

46. Id. at 151–54.
47. Id. at 84.