

---

*Teachers College Record*

**Book Review**  
**School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to  
Market Commodity**

**May 26, 2006**

**Stephen Petrina**

<<<>>>

Retrieved 8/4/06 from  
<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=12514>

---

**Title:** School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity

**Author:** Alex Molnar

**Publisher:** Routledge/Falmer, New York

"Schools Must Reveal Cola Deals." "Money-Hungry Boards Won't Ban Junk Food." "Kits High Considers a Future Without Coke." "Schools Shouldn't be Pimping for Soft Drink Companies." "Pepsi-School Deal 'Absolutely Disgusting'." "McDonald's High? Wal-Mart Elementary?" These headlines from Vancouver newspapers during the fall of 2003 are just a sample of reactions to trends all too common across North America. The very best at tracking, mapping and framing the commercialization of schooling is Alex Molnar. And the clearest, most cogent and productive book on the issue is *School Commercialism*.

For over three decades, Molnar has defended public education through activism and research. Upon concluding a brief autobiography written in the mid-1970s, he said: "I still believe schools can be made better places for kids than they are now and that the struggle to make them so is worthwhile" (1975a, p. 166). Similarly, one of his early essays on students rights asserts that civil liberties do not stop at the schoolhouse door (Molnar, 1975b). The sway of corporate authority, censorship and suppression of resistance within schools work in tandem and mean that academic freedom is at stake, a point to which I will return. Molnar's convictions on public schooling and students rights, and his long-term investment in public education underwrite the meticulous research of *School Commercialism*. But is it still reasonable to expect that schools be relatively free

of commercial interests and pressures? If schools were never truly a marketplace of ideas, is it not sufficient that they are simply a marketplace?

Molnar begins the second chapter of *School Commercialism* with the following thesis:

Commercialism is an expression of advanced capitalist culture and a profound threat to democratic institutions. Its impact on schools is, at its most basic, to transform the guiding ideal of public schools as centers of learning serving the public good to centers of profit benefiting private interests.... Schools have come to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing, and commodities to be bought and sold. (p. 16).

To be sure, the commercialization of schooling is a historically significant and multifaceted feature of capitalism's expansion of markets and consumers. Although the market for what *Fortune* dubbed, "The Merchant to the Child," is synonymous with the proliferation of consumer goods throughout the twentieth century in North America, the aggressive and crass commercialization of all facets of schooling is a fairly recent phenomenon (1930) This history is somewhat truncated in *School Commercialism* but there is an adequate sketch, especially in chapter 4, for the student who is willing to take on the task of archival analysis and genealogy.

Molnar maps school commercialism as a hybrid of contradictory discourses and three basic practices: selling *to* schools, selling *in* schools and selling *of* schools (pp. 6-8). Selling *to* and *in* schools produces sponsorships (of programs *and* curriculum), exclusivity contracts, incentive programs, appropriation (advertising, naming, leasing) of space, electronic marketing and fund raising. Selling *of* schools amounts to privatization (pp. 21-26). Administrators typically rationalize their decisions for appealing to market opportunism with needs-based reasoning, albeit faulty. In contrast, corporate motives are more varied. Molnar is skeptical of discourses pertaining to altruism and goodwill, and notes that, oftentimes, base profit motives drive executive decisions to sell brands, products, and services *to* and *in* schools (pp. 31-41). Molnar continually points out that the marketing industry and revenue-minded executives are shameless.

Molnar's caveat that selling *to* schools "remains relatively unproblematic" (p. 7) seems contradictory given his painstaking research suggesting otherwise vis a vis the politics of vending, and most notably, marketing technology, textbook markets, products and transactions (Petrina, 2002). Monopolies on vending are renowned, and alternatively, "controversial" products and independent vendors are increasingly squeezed from school markets. For example, in the mid-1990s, Apple Computer, Inc. pulled Voyager's *Who Built America* CD ROM, which was initially bundled with their shipments to K-12 schools because of its "controversial" content. Complaints were made about this multimedia history textbook because of its pro-labor bias and its realistic depictions of "male-to-male intimacy" in the American west and "illegal" abortion. Similarly, the Surrey School District in British Columbia, the lower mainland's largest, banned children's books with pro-gay and lesbian content, including *Asha's Mums*, effectively limiting the school textbook market for this particular book's publisher, Women's Press.

The proliferation and power of vendors also helped reduce curriculum to shopping, which is hardly "unproblematic." Food vending to schools was controversial since its beginnings, when proto-vendors in Boston during the mid-1890s generated popular resistance to the new school lunch programs based on dietetics. The janitors and pushcart owners, who were casually selling goodies and sandwiches to students, felt they were displaced from their small businesses by the new compact among medicine (dietetics), science and the schools (Petrina, 2006). Similar politics of nutrition exist today among school food vendors, as Molnar carefully explains in chapter 3.

The selling *of* schools is clearly articulated in chapter 4, a case study of the failures of Edison Schools in managing educational systems and trends toward privatization. Contrary to the RAND Corporation's fairly rosy portrait of Edison Schools, which in 2004-05 was managing 103 "public" schools and servicing 65,000 students, Molnar provides a resistance narrative, portraying this company as slippery and opportunistic in the way it takes advantage of impoverished districts to capitalize on public coffers earmarked for reform. Molnar concludes that "the selling of schools— privatization— transforms public education into a segmented collection of private products and services sold for the profit of investors" (p. 122). Of course, this disturbing practice has its parallel in the "eBaying" of higher education, so accurately rendered by Peter Cole and Patricia O'Riley's (2005) "auction research":

okay where do you want to start on this beauty on the block this  
afternoon the faculty of education university of xxx xx  
do I hear an opening bid of one hundred and fifty thousand one a one a  
one over there with the bulge in his silk suit jacket  
do I hear two one and a half now two with the fedora now three  
three three three woman with the microsoft ball cap now four with  
the sacred bundle of cash  
no halves now we're on roll whattayawannabid whattayawannabid  
do I hear five five a five a five a woman with the xerox earrings go half  
five and a half now six and a half to the man with the red tie  
there's a reserve bid on this folks and we're not even close to it do I  
hear a million  
and now two two two two and half now three in the  
trenchcoat...[sic] (pp. 25-26)

At my university, where corporatization has proliferated over the past two decades (Petrina & Weir, 2005), administrators, faculty and students are currently recoiling over "our" failure to meet the demands of a once classified exclusivity contract with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, signed in August 1995. UBC faculty, students and staff did not consume the necessary 33.6 million cans or bottles of Coke products over the past decade. After the first five years, 10 million cans and bottles were consumed; after 10 years, a total of 17 million was consumed, amounting to six million liters of Coke products. However, this was only 51% of the contractual volume promised. At one point in the contract, UBC began sealing off and eliminating drinking fountains, apparently planning to coax people to quench their thirsts at the Coke machines. Coke's exclusivity

contract now extends through August 2007 with no money flowing back to the university. To date, nearly all Canadian universities have signed exclusivity contracts with either Coca-Cola or Pepsi, but UBC is the first to be feeling the consequences of commercialization (Cook & Petrina, 2005; Froese-Germain, 2005).

*School Commercialism* would benefit from a more complex theory of what it is these companies actually do. The book is a model for marshalling empirical data to engender narratives of commercialization, but it is nonetheless lacking an overarching theory. For instance, Molnar reiterates a number of times that "American companies increasingly focus on building brands— images" (p. 133), but this only begins to describe the whole picture. Network theories of sponsorship drawn from economics (e.g., Olkkonen, 2001) are helpful in further understanding Molnar's work. Similarly, theories drawn from cultural studies, in this case du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus' (1997) circuit of culture, are crucial to understanding corporate designs on the world. These circuits of culture through which the commercial becomes personal, and vice versa, are marked by moments of identity, representation, production, consumption, regulation and waste. Inasmuch as corporations produce, consume and regulate identities, representations and waste, their identities and representations are reciprocally produced, consumed and regulated. This is as true for Nike as it is for McDonald's and Sony (Petrina, 2000).

Again, I commend the author and editor for the attention given to details; the index is no exception. For my own interests, the only major concepts I found missing from the index were academic freedom and censorship. The first attenuates and the second proliferates in these environments of commercialism. Charter and constitutional rights, civil rights and human rights— tenuous as they are for most in the world—are seriously compromised and intensified in this post-9/11 era (Petrina, Volk & Kim, 2004; Roman, 2004). There is no more important time for those who can to exercise and defend academic freedom as a viable, necessary form of activism. Sadly, school systems in Canada and the United States have dispensed with the notion of academic freedom, although recent legislation for intelligent design and religious expression is reviving the concept for teachers in a fairly regressive form. Political turmoil and upheaval is reviving academic freedom as well. In early March 2006, Aurora, Colorado social studies teacher Jay Bennish was suspended after a student circulated a tape of Bennish's in-class comparison of the arrogance of the Bush administration's policies with the arrogance of Hitler's Nazi Party. Prior to the late-1980s, in the United States, school teachers were as likely to win academic freedom cases as school boards. However, in January 1988, the Supreme Court ruled on *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, concluding that control over curriculum, and in effect academic freedom, rests with administrators and school boards (Strope, 1999). The Supreme Court has since refused to hear cases challenging this decision. Critics argue that school doors closed for both academic freedom and the First Amendment in the classroom due to this decision, a policy shift that Molnar took a stand against in the mid-1970s. Whether administrators' "actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns," which is the test of the *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* decision, is questionable. In the meantime, we are returning to the chilling era when books such as *School Commercialism* are in real danger of getting ignored,

blacklisted or banned from schools. Clearly, I wholeheartedly endorse this book as an excellent survey and synthesis of dangerous trends in the commercialization of schooling.

### *References*

Cole, P. & O'Riley, P. (2005). Coyote and raven talk about the business of education or how did Wall Street Bay Street and Sesame Street get into the pockets of publicly funded universities or vice versa? *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, 7(1), 15-28.

Cook, S. & Petrina, S. (2005). Changing tastes: Coca-Cola, water and the commercialization of higher education. *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, 7(1), 95-111.

du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H. & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage.

Editors. (1930, November). The merchant to the child. *Fortune* 4(5), 71-78, 100-112, 140.

Froese-Germain, B. (2005). National survey of school commercialism in Canada. *Perspectives*, 5(3), 1, 4-9.

*Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*. 484 U.S. 260. (1988). Retrieved May 2, 2006 from [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0484\\_0260\\_ZS.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0484_0260_ZS.html).

Molnar, A. (1975a). Alex Molnar. In W. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists* (pp. 165-66). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Company.

Molnar, A. (1975b). On student rights. In W. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists* (pp. 167-72). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Company.

Olkkonen, R. (2001). Case study: The network approach to international sport sponsorship arrangement. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 16(4), 309-29.

Petrina, S. (2000). The political ecology of design and technology education: An inquiry into methods. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 10(3), 207-237.

Petrina, S. (2002). Getting a purchase on "The School of Tomorrow" and its constituent commodities: Histories and historiographies of technologies. *History of Education Quarterly*, 42(1), 75-111.

Petrina, S. (2006). The medicalization of education: An historiographic synthesis. *History of Education Quarterly*, 46(1).

Petrina, S. & Weir, L. (2005). Commercializing academic freedom: R&D, technology transfer, patents and copyrights. *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, 7(1), 112-18.

Petrina, S., Volk, K. and Kim. S. (2004). Technology and rights. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 14(3), 181-204.

Roman, L. (2004). States of insecurity: Cold war memory, "global citizenship" and its discontents. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 25(2), 231-59.

Strope, J. (1999, November). Academic freedom: In our minds, the legal myth dies slowly! *NASSP Bulletin*, 83, 14-21.