

Book Review

Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Educational Theory for a Free Market in Education

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Jerry Kirkpatrick, *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Educational Theory for a Free Market in Education*. Claremont, CA: TLJ Books, 2008. 212 pp. ISBN 978-0-9787803-3-3, \$18.95 (pbk.)

Jerry Kirkpatrick's *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Educational Theory for a Free Market in Education* presents a provocative synthesis of the educational philosophies of Maria Montessori and John Dewey with the economic philosophies of Ayn Rand and Ludwig Von Mises. At the center of Kirkpatrick's thesis is his belief that public education be subject to a free-market model. Kirkpatrick holds that students can thrive in an educational system free from all forms of coercion, something he believes can only be accomplished in a free-market educational system that is not bound by government intervention. He borrows from Ayn Rand in arguing that only the individual matters and that all forms of imposed authority, including compulsory, state-run education, need to be abolished. Kirkpatrick's substitution for an education system administered by states and municipalities is an education system that is privatized and subject to the free market.

Throughout the book, Kirkpatrick promotes a competitive, free-market education system that prepares students for future life by altering many of the foundations of modern U.S. education. He looks to Dewey to support his argument that students should be educated without coercion, borrowing from Dewey's notion that each student's education be driven by his or her interests and experience. In this sense, Kirkpatrick's reading of Dewey is accurate. However, in arguing for competition and privatization in education, Kirkpatrick misappropriates several of Dewey's key theories, including Dewey's disdain for finite ends separated from means and

overly vocationalistic training for “future life.” Kirkpatrick also appears to eschew Dewey’s belief in schools as democratic social institutions.

In keeping with his free-market model for education, Kirkpatrick sees education as preparation for a career within a capitalist system. Kirkpatrick contends throughout his book that the ultimate goal for education is for young people to find a “productive career” (25). Kirkpatrick argues,

To instill in the young a purpose in life is the fundamental aim of education. Purpose in life is defined by one’s chosen values, especially career . . . at the end of formal schooling, the young adult should be fully equipped with the knowledge, values, skills—and confident determination—required to pursue a productive career. (110)

Kirkpatrick’s model is overtly careerist and is contrary to much of what Dewey not only argued for but also demonstrated in his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. In Kirkpatrick’s educational system, knowledge and ideas are for sale, students and their families “get” the education they can pay for, and education has narrowly defined ends separated from means. Those ends center on students finding a productive career. Kirkpatrick has missed a key idea in Dewey’s educational philosophy, that is, the idea that education does not have predetermined ends:

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above.¹

Dewey not only argued against imposed ends in education, he also opposed the notion that education is preparation for a future life.

Kirkpatrick’s argument for free-market education is based in his belief that a business model can be applied to the nation’s public school systems. He believes that the privatization of education will lead to the innovation and experimentation that Dewey and Montessori espoused. Writes Kirkpatrick, “The deregulation and privatization of education would open a new era of experimentation, not unlike the experimentation that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (179).

Regarding who will pay for education in this model, Kirkpatrick evokes a version of social Darwinism for schools whereby students and their families would receive that for which they can pay. He argues, “Education is a staple that everyone who has children must budget for. And under capitalism, they [the poor] will budget for it, because the poor will enjoy higher incomes, lower prices, and better and greater quantities of goods and services than they now have” (182). Kirkpatrick does not indicate how poor families, many who often struggle to afford food and shelter, will budget for their children’s educations.

Kirkpatrick goes on to argue that in a free-market education model, educational entrepreneurs will “hang out shingles that say something to the effect:

‘Ideas for Sale’ or ‘Knowledge for Sale’” (160). He believes that students and parents will buy ideas based on needs and wants, and employers will hire students based on the reputations of the teachers with whom the students have studied. Kirkpatrick’s “knowledge for sale” model is in stark contrast to Dewey’s notion of knowing/knowledge as an active process where knowers are actively engaged in coming to know some *thing*.² Further, Kirkpatrick corrupts Dewey’s empiricism, as Dewey would not support the reforms of professional educators or others willing to mandate a single, universal model for education. Dewey would leave reform to the teachers and students in each community *qua* classroom, where knowledge would be consistently shaped and reformed by those most intimately involved in the educative process.

While Kirkpatrick overlooks many of Dewey’s ideas regarding education and knowledge acquisition, he also chooses to ignore Dewey’s notions about democratic life. In a Deweyan sense, community is defined as a group of individuals actively engaged with each other and working cooperatively to solve social problems and to reach common goals in the interest of the group. Individual rights are not subjugated to the interest of the community, but private interests are limited in scope in relation to the overall satisfactory functioning of community life. Kirkpatrick borrows from Dewey in propping up the individual, but he ignores Dewey’s more complex understanding of the individual as part of a larger whole. In *Ethics*, Dewey writes

The positive import of “common good” is suggested by the idea of sharing, participating—an idea involved in the very idea of *community*. Sharing a good or value in a way which makes it social in quality is not identical with dividing up a material thing into physical parts. To partake is to *take* part, to *play* a role. It is something active, something which engages the desires and aims of each contributing member.³

Dewey eschews the dualism of social and individual; instead, he holds that society *is* individuals in association with one another. As Dewey argues, “Society is individuals-in-their-relations. An individual apart from social relations is a myth—or a monstrosity.”⁴ It is within social arrangements that the individual refines his or her personality and strengths while also accepting a role within the group. It is here that the individual learns the norms and values that define the culture in which he or she lives. It is within the social group that the individual’s true acumen is realized.

Kirkpatrick’s argument for a free-market education model grounded in libertarian economic policy comes at a time when the capitalist, free-market economic system in the United States is revealing its deep faults. Daily, there is news of mass layoffs, corruption, and crumbling economic and social infrastructures. These recent events make Kirkpatrick’s argument for a free-market model seem even more misguided. If Americans cannot trust the free market to offer them employment, a livable wage, a safe home, and affordable food and energy, why should Americans entrust their children’s education to the same failed free market system?

Notes

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916/1944), 108-09.
2. See, for example, Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn, 1929/1960); John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938); John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949); and Larry Hickman, "Dewey's Theory of Inquiry," in *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, ed. Larry Hickman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 167.
3. John Dewey, *Ethics*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 7: 1932*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1991), 345.
4. *Ibid.*, 80.

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