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Disasters, either natural or manufactured, open the door to the alchemy of systemic change. In the wake of disaster, communities question their structures, values, boundaries, and institutions. This alchemy, as Kenneth Saltman and his colleagues demonstrate in *Schooling and the Politics of Disaster*, makes schools vulnerable to corruption, privatization, and standardization.

Kenneth Saltman, the editor of this volume and an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Research at DePaul University, is unabashedly critical of public school privatization and corporatization. He has authored several books related to privatization and alternative structures of democratic education. In the introduction to this edited volume, he makes his point of view clear: “Rather than investing in public schools and other public spheres crucial to a more democratic society, the

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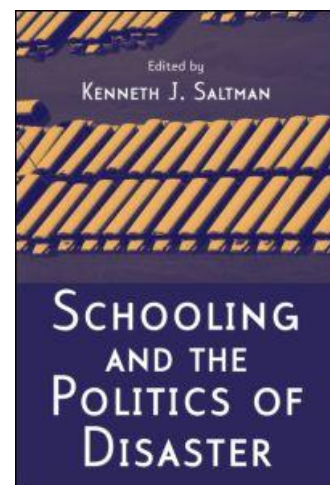


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political right is pushing to privatize and commodify these outcomes” (p. 1). To explore how disasters connect to this notion, Saltman brought together education researchers such as Michael Apple from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and Peter McLaren from the University of California, Los Angeles, as well as scholars outside of education such as Robin Truth Goodman, an Assistant Professor of English at Florida State University. United by the common perspective that neoliberal policies negatively shape education, the authors of these fifteen chapters use the theme of the politics of disaster to explore racism, classism, sexism, and opportunism.

The book is divided into three loosely coupled sections: Theorizing the Politics of Disaster, Disaster and Educational Policy, and Disaster and Global Implications. The sections are tied together by an examination of how the political, economic, and cultural contexts of schooling are changed by the politics of disaster. The first section, Theorizing the Politics of Disaster, provides historical, philosophical, and political perspectives on the intersections between disaster and education. The second section, Disaster and Educational Policy, uses the lens of the politics of disaster to examine several current education issues including No Child Left Behind, textbook publishing, commercialization and privatization, urban reform, and think tanks. The third section, Disaster and Global Implications, explores issues such as women’s rights in the “New Iraq,” food production, post 9/11 development aid, and sustainable development. The book is an eclectic, yet compelling, examination of neoliberal policies and their implications for public education.

The first section includes four chapters examining the politics of disaster and its motivations. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath are the most often used examples in this section, probably because, as Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon observe, “the demonization of the black victims of Hurricane Katrina is perhaps the most graphic in recent history,” (p. 27). Katrina illuminated the still-prevalent race and class issues in the US. Henry Giroux, in his chapter on Hurricane Katrina and the Politics of Disposability, argues that the government knew of the impending break of the levees that caused the flooding of New Orleans. The subsequent delayed response to assist the victims of Katrina



“relates to a deeper set of memories of racial injustice and violence... and the present intensification of its utter disregard for populations now considered disposable,” (p. 57). America witnessed this disregard. Some citizens paused and questioned why assistance was delayed, why the government was not prepared to provide aid, why those with the least means to escape disaster were blamed, and why the flooding happened in the first place. Post-Katrina, right wing political and religious leaders praised the disaster for its “cleansing” of New Orleans, and educational entrepreneurs referred to the hurricane as a “clean slate” for education (pp. 78, 97). In their chapter, Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo call the post-Katrina overhaul of education a “neoliberal wet dream of a private sector takeover of public education,” (p. 83). The authors in this first section ask readers to examine their beliefs about the victims of disasters, the government’s role in responding to disasters, and the opportunities disasters provide. Yet, I wish they had discussed how alternative theories could be used to shape, or at least frame, disasters. What are alternative responses to disasters? What context is needed to create these alternative responses?

The primary claim of *Disaster and Educational Policy*, the second section, is that the politics of disaster are used to justify privatizing “broken” education systems. Citing policies and disasters such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the September 11th terrorist attacks, and Hurricane Katrina, these six chapters provide descriptions of how neoliberals are using disasters to leverage fulfillment of their political agendas. The section begins with Kristen Buras’s description of the government’s post-Katrina benign neglect and disinvestment in infrastructures, such as schools and basic social services. Benign neglect was first proposed as a policy by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965. Moynihan advised then-President Nixon to adopt a policy of “benign neglect” on issues of racial inequality to reduce government support to African Americans (p. 109). This policy, Buras argues, was evident in the aftermath of Katrina and the lack of government assistance to the primarily poor, African American victims. Though Katrina dominates the first half of the book, this section includes pieces on NCLB and the standardization and commercialization associated with it.

The authors question the motivations of NCLB given its regimented guidelines coupled with its lack of funding. The textbook industry, for example, was poised to benefit the most from NCLB; and the Bush family, as Pepi Leistyna describes in his piece, has developed a close and long-lasting relationship with textbook publishers. Leistyna writes, “All of this rhetoric about accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and excellence in public education is really an ideological trap intended to ensure that public schools fail, thus paving the way to privatization,” (p. 155). Philip Kovacs, in his piece on education think tanks, institutes, and foundations, argues that conservative and neoliberal think tanks are promulgating rhetoric that the schools are failing and that the best remedy is privatization. These pieces provide interesting examples and persuasive evidence that privatization is a thinly veiled motive underlying the neoliberal politics of disaster.

The third section, Disaster and Global Implications, is the shortest and most eclectic. Though the authors examine various issues from food production to foreign aid policy to women’s education in Iraq, the unifying theme is how these government policies influence education. For example, Michael Apple describes an Asian city that had no schools or other essential infrastructures because of a series of events rooted in the government’s decision to harvest potatoes for cheap fast food French fries. Greg Tanaka, in his chapter on US education in a post 9/11 world, describes a simulated government exercise that falls apart as participants feel left out of the “participatory” decision-making process. Tanaka links the failure of this prescriptive exercise in participatory government to the failure of the standardized treatment of schools in the NCLB era. Mario Novelli and Susan Robertson demonstrate how seemingly well-intentioned global policies could be motivated by other political priorities. They describe how the US provided aid to Afghanistan to develop textbooks, which seemed like a humanitarian gesture. Yet, the content of these textbooks included language promoting violence against Soviets in a nationalistic attempt to use a foreign education system to develop our enemy’s enemy. It is a global phenomenon that some policies can be motivated by surreptitious goals.

The book ended abruptly. I expected a conclusion from Saltman tying the divergent pieces together and solidifying the notion that the politics of disaster are being used to recreate the education system aligned with neoliberal ideals. I wanted more explicit connections between pieces and suggestions for how to reframe the politics of disaster to create transformative alternatives within the traditional public school system. Beyond this lack of conclusion and explicit bridging of concepts, there are few notable issues with the structure of the book. As this is an edited volume there are some repeated ideas and quotations, pieces that do not fit as well in some sections as others, and arguments not fully developed. In addition, some chapters provide explicit connections between disaster and education while others seem to include the connection as an afterthought. Yet, readers can easily overlook these cavils given the quality of the material.

I taught in New Orleans public schools before the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Post-Katrina, I was optimistic that the New Orleans public school system would reemerge stronger and more equitable. I could not have imagined the outright dismantling of the New Orleans public school system that would arise out of the alchemy of disaster. Charter schools became the dominant form of public education in Post-Katrina New Orleans and the New Orleans Public School District retained a handful of district managed schools. Though I believe that some of the charter schools that have opened in New Orleans in recent years will effectively serve students and the surrounding community in a democratic model of education, Saltman and his colleagues make me a little more skeptical of the intentions behind education reforms in the wake of disaster. I am more aware of the overt and covert messages of the politics of disaster and how they influence education. As I read the book, I wanted to call my friends who teach or run schools in New Orleans and get their insider perspective. I wanted to discuss the book with my colleagues, professors, and classmates. This desire is the mark of a successful book—engaging, thought provoking, and forthright enough in its message to engender discussion.

About the Reviewer

Lenay Dunn is a PhD student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Arizona State University and also serves as the associate director of a research and evaluation unit there. Previous to her tenure at ASU, Ms. Dunn served as a Research Analyst at the American Institutes for Research, a Teach for America teacher, and held leadership roles in various K-12 and higher education programs in New Orleans. Ms. Dunn holds a Master of Arts in Social Sciences in Education with an emphasis on research, policy, and evaluation from Stanford University. Her interests include education policy development and implementation, equity, educational opportunity, systemic reform, and research and evaluation methods.



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