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Kovacs, Philip E. (Ed.) (2011) *The Gates Foundation and the Future of U.S. "Public" Schools*. NY: Routledge.

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Reviewed by Susan Ohanian

When I started reading this book, I immediately applied a lens from Chris Hedges' *Death of the Liberal Class*. Then, in Chapter 5, "Corporatism, KIPP, and Cultural Eugenics," Jim Horn introduces his chapter with an epigram from Hedges' *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*: "Corporatism is about crushing the capacity for moral choice." Horn's use of Hedges in his chapter provoked me to buy Hedges's book. I admit that I judge the success of a book by how many *other* books it inspires me to read. More about this later.

Although Deron Boyles begins the Foreword by pointing to the fact that Barack Obama and Arne Duncan "surround themselves with corporate leaders, eschew critical scholars, and play the political game of blaming schools that seems to be a standard and enduring part of political

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life,” the Obama education agenda is mentioned infrequently by name in the rest of the book. This isn’t surprising: After all, in a book called *The Gates Foundation and the Future of U.S. “Public” Schools*, we would expect a concentration of complaints about Gates. Fine. That said, I was pleased to see in Chapter 7, “Governing Identity through Neoliberal Education Initiatives: Get[ting] Schooled’ in the Marketplace,” that Leslee Gray comes very close to acknowledging explicitly that the Gates agenda IS the Obama Agenda. She notes:

The guiding logic behind President Obama’s education initiative, Race to the Top Fund, is clear: “Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy” and “building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction” are his top priorities. This language could have just as likely been lifted directly from the Gates Foundation website.



Philip E. Kovacs

As I pointed out in the September 2010 *Extra*, a couple of reporters [among a cast of hundreds] get this. Writing in *Bloomberg Business Week*,¹ Pulitzer Prize reporter Daniel Golden is clear, “Today, the Gates Foundation and Education Secretary Duncan move in apparent lockstep.” Golden calls this lockstep approach “an intellectual cousin of the Bush administration’s 2002 No Child Left Behind law.”

Many commentators have noted that in his 2011 State of the Union Speech, President Obama, who had just appointed William Daley, the top Washington representative of JPMorgan Chase to be his new chief of staff, sounded like a corporate CEO with a failing business model, with his speech putting him in contention for another *Advertising Age* award. Obama’s repeated

¹ Daniel Golden, “Bill Gates’ School Crusade,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, July 15, 2010, http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10_30/b4188058281758.htm

"Win the future" was a tag right out of corporate marketing, but there's nothing new here. *In Death of the Liberal Class*² Chris Hedges observes,

Asked to name a business executive he admires, President Obama cited Frederick Smith of FedEx, although Smith is a union-busting Republican. Smith served as Senator John McCain's finance chair during McCain's failed run for the presidency. "Smith is rich and powerful, but there is no ethical system, religious or secular, that would hold him up as a man worthy of emulation." FedEx lavished money on many members of Congress in 1996 so they would vote for an ad hoc change in the law banning the Teamsters Union from organizing workers at FedEx.

"The election of Obama was one more triumph of illusion over substance. It was a skillful manipulation and betrayal of the public by a corporate power elite. We mistook style and ethnicity—an advertising tactic pioneered by Calvin Klein and Benetton—for progressive politics and genuine change. The goal of a branded Obama, as with all brands, was to make passive consumers mistake a brand for an experience. And this is why Obama was named Advertising Age's marketer of the year for 2008, beating out Apple and Zappos." (p. 199)

In February 2011, Slate.com launched an automatic slogan generator³ to help Obama tag his various initiatives:

- Yes to tomorrow
- Race to recovery
- Race to a strong middle class
- Forge responsibility
- Prepare for competitiveness
- Searching for our children
- Searching for integrity
- Spring ahead to innovation

² Chris Hedges, *Death of the Liberal Class*, Nation Books, 2010, 199

³ "Refresh the Slogan!" Slate.com, Feb 9, 2011 <http://www.slate.com/id/2284346?wpisrc=newsletter>

- Race to success
- Seize everyone

I played the game 10 times but got discouraged when “Make GE and Exxon pay taxes” did not come up. Neither did “Shut Up, Bill Gates.”

In Chapter 1, “From Carnegie to Gates: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Venture Philanthropy Agenda for Public Education,” Kenneth Saltman offers valuable background information and insight about the rise of venture philanthropy, explaining how it shifts the governance of public schools to the private sector. If you doubt the importance of this shift, think of how venture philanthropic language has come to dominate all discourse about public schools: choice, competition, efficiency, accountability, monopoly, turnaround, brought to scale. Venture philanthropists have been working hard to remake classrooms, school leadership, and teacher education—while teacher unions, professional organizations, and colleges of education take a snooze. Saltman points out that “Venture philanthropists openly talk about U.S. students ideally becoming workers who will compete for scarce jobs against workers from poorer nations. Values of worker discipline, docility, and submission to authority are injected into the corporate school vision as they represent the ideal of the disciplined, docile, and submissive workforce.”

Saltman points out something few people seem to realize: For every ten dollars given by the Gates Foundation, four dollars is lost from the public wealth in taxes. The philanthropist would otherwise give this money to the public in the form of taxes. So a big chunk of all that money Gates is spending to get teachers on script, destroy tenure, and standardize curriculum is actually OUR money; Bill Gates is using our tax dollars to mold America. Saltman calls on readers “to stop applying business metaphors and logic to educational thinking derived from discredited market fundamentalism.” Such terms *as choice, monopoly, turnaround, efficiency* need to be dropped in favor of public language and assumptions.

In Chapter 2, Michael Klonsky calls this *Power Philanthropy*. He provides a history of Gates Foundation “reformation” of Manual High School, a school named, as

The New Yorker's Katherine Boo observed⁴, "for the kind of labor it prepared students to do—bricklaying, printing," a school that in its day had produced some of the city's leading black politicians. Although Boo gives a poignant portrayal of Manual students, she relegates what Klonsky calls Gates's "top-down attempt at restructuring" to an aside. Naming Manual High one of the worst in Colorado, she adds:

This wretched showing belied the fact that, for a decade, Manual High had been the object of aggressive and thoughtful reforms. The most recent was a million-dollar intervention by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, begun in 2001, which turned each of Manual's three floors into an intimate mini-school, with its own principal.

When "thoughtful reform" fails, then schools are labeled "impervious to reform." Just as the Gates Foundation ignored teachers, so does Boo. She is much more interested in the patrician superintendent with prep school and Ivy League credentials with "more money than he knew what to do with," Michael Bennet.⁵ The press, like Gates, Broad, and others of their ilk, don't think teachers are worth noticing.

Klonsky says the Gates small-schools plan was never actually implemented at Manual: "Its vision of pure, autonomous small schools soon turned into three amorphous programs, with kids and teachers trying to make up for shortages by crossing over from school to school for needed classes and programs." In *Business Week*, Jay Greene and William C. Symonds point out⁶ that

⁴ Katherine Boo, "Expectations," *The New Yorker*, Jan. 15, 20007
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/01/15/070115fa_fact_boo#ixzz1DUB2swq2

⁵ Bennet, first an aide to oil billionaire Philip Anschutz, was appointed superintendent of the Denver Public Schools by Mayor John Hickenlooper, only to be subsequently appointed Senator from Colorado to fill the seat vacated by Ken Salazar after the latter was chosen as Obama's Secretary of the Interior. In his only run for office, Bennet eked out a narrow victory in the November 2010 election to retain his seat in the Senate. Bennet instituted a merit pay for teachers program during his short tenure as head of the Denver school system.

⁶ Jay Green and William C. Symonds, "Bill Gates Gets Schooled," *Business Week*, June 26, 2006
http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.php?id=6207

“the famed choir was limited to one school, the popular director left, and that program withered, along with band and theater.” Reformers gutted the school of programs that mattered and then blamed teachers and students for failure.

In Chapter 3, “The Gates Foundation’s Interventions into Education, Health, and Food Policies,” David Hursh points out that “Because the Gates Foundation is the largest philanthropic organization in the world. . . few academics are willing to criticize it for fear they will reduce their chances of receiving funding.” I think that goes for unions and professional organizations too. Why *did* the AFT invite Bill Gates to address a national conference of teachers? Well, that same month, the Gates Foundation gave the AFT a pile of money to push for “teacher quality initiatives,” having already given them a smaller pile for “conference support.”

From the Gates Foundation web site:

American Federation of Teachers Educational
Foundation

Date: July 2010

Purpose: *to continue the American Federation Of Teachers Innovation Fund’s efforts to support local affiliates that engage in research-based, union-developed teacher quality initiatives and to work with a consortium of local and state affiliates—the Teacher Excellence Collaborative—to create and implement a comprehensive development and evaluation system based upon the American Federation Of Teachers framework*

Amount: \$3,421,725

American Federation of Teachers Educational
Foundation

Date: June 2010

Purpose: *for conference support*

Amount: \$217,200

Hursh points to problems with the Gates Foundation’s involvement in global health that should give pause to educators: The Foundation’s “reluctance to embrace research, demonstration, and capacity building in health delivery is worsening the gap between what technology can do and what is actually happening to health in poor

communities.” Furthermore, the foundation’s “vertical disease specific funding strategies. . . damage health systems in developing countries.” Vertical strategies don’t strengthen existing health systems; they even undermine them.

Writing in Salon.com⁷, Mark Benjamin explains how “Law and Order: SVU” used his investigative reporting on the anti-malarial drug Lariam or mefloquine. “It was invented by the U.S. Army in the 1970s. It’s great for preventing malaria, but it has some minor drawbacks, like causing psychosis, suicidal thoughts, depression, and paranoia, which have been reported to last ‘long after’ taking the pills, according to the FDA.” The Army says 1 in 10,000 people who receive the drug suffers serious side effects. A British study says 1 in 140. “Law and Order: SVU” detectives “decide at the end of the show that the military is well aware of what the drug does to soldiers. That they have made a cold, hard cost-benefit analysis that it is worth the deaths of some soldiers—and even their wives—to prevent malaria. They think that this drug is better than the alternatives and they don’t care who it hurts and they will cover it up if they have to.” Apparently, Bill and Melinda Gates agree with the Army.

Writing in *The New York Review of Books*,⁸ Richard Horton, a physician and editor of *The Lancet*, writes that when Melinda Gates stood up at the Gates Foundation’s Malaria Forum on Oct. 17, 2007, no one expected her to use a word—“eradicate”—that more experienced malaria experts had feared for almost forty years.

Ah, *more experienced experts*. Therein lies the tale. Bill and Melinda Gates choose their experts, and don’t seem interested in possible pernicious side effects—in health policy or education. I’m not making a link here that Bill Gates hasn’t made himself. On Market Watch’s “The Big

⁷ Mark Benjamin, “Ripped from my Headlines!” Salon.com, May 25, 2005 [http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/tv/review/2005/05/25/lo_svu/]

⁸ Richard Horton, “Stopping Malaria: The Wrong Road,” *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 24, 2011

Interview”⁹ he said, “Innovation, whether it’s the malaria vaccine or a better way of educating inner city schools you don’t want to wait—those things have so much impact. . . .” In this interview, we see Bill Gates as a man who can’t admit a mistake or even a doubt. Not to mention he has no sense of humor.

Question: Which would have more impact on the world? Eradicating polio or Windows 95?

Bill Gates: It’s hard to say. . . . If you had no personal computer that would be a very dramatic thing. . . .

I took the question to be at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

In Chapter 4 “Marketing New Schools for a New Century: An Examination of Neoliberal School Reform in New York City,” Jessica Shiller reminds us that President Obama remains loyal to the market-based strategies that have ruled our domestic agenda, including education, for the past three decades. In New York City, the New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI), with the help of the Gates Foundation, along with the Carnegie and Soros Foundations, opened small schools at “the pace of Starbucks franchises” and narrowed the focus to practices that will maximize short-term outcome gain. Shiller has a valuable table contrasting a neoliberal school system with a democratic one.

I found Shiller’s discussion of professional development in NCSI schools to be fascinating: “PD was decided by the principal for the staff. There was no room for conversation of any kind. This is the safest kind of staff meeting.” The principal making these decisions had been a teacher for only four years before becoming a principal. And guess what dominated these PD meetings? Discipline. Reading that for “the administration and much of the teaching staff, punishments were seen as a solution to what they perceived as behavioral problems. . . .” takes me back to

⁹ Bill Gates, *Market Watch*, Feb. 4, 2011 <http://www.marketwatch.com/video/asset/the-big-interview-with-bill-gates-2011-02-04/6EBE3E9B-3B68-44C0-BC4A-7957A27E4265#!6EBE3E9B-3B68-44C0-BC4A-7957A27E4265>.

my days as a middle school teacher. Teachers grouched at every meeting that if only we had a formal discipline policy—that was enforced without exception—our problems would be solved. I kept insisting, “Be careful of what you wish for.” We got our discipline policy and it solved nothing because often rotten curriculum manifests itself as a discipline problem. Shiller recognizes this, pointing out that behavioral problems could have been academic or other sorts of problems, adding, “Neoliberal school reformers often underestimate the complexity of teaching. . . .”

In Chapter 12, “Why Current Education Reform Efforts Will Fail,” Marion Brady hits the nail on the head when he names curriculum as the problem. He went to the nearest middle school and borrowed 8th grade textbooks for math, science, language arts, and social studies, looking for important ideas therein. He reports, “There were 1,465 important ideas. That comes out to a brand new idea about every twenty minutes, and no going back for review.” No wonder teachers want tips on solving discipline problems.

Jim Horn begins Chapter 5, “Corporatism, KIPP, and Cultural Eugenics with this observation by Chris Hedges: “Corporatism is about crushing the capacity for moral choice.” This is ironic, as Jessica Shiller demonstrates in her chapter; “Choice” is what the neoliberal reformers pretend to be all about, though of course they aren’t talking about moral choice but means-to-an-end, economic options. The morality of the moment is of no concern. Horn observes, as does Brady, that the school reformers, using the same reform strategy for two decades, still haven’t closed the achievement gap. Horn recounts school reform monarch Gates’s appearance as featured speaker at a 2009 TED conference, “where he considered four world problems that must be dealt with for twenty-first century humanity to have a chance to thrive: malaria, AIDS, pneumonia, and teachers.” Every teacher and everybody who cares about teachers should watch this outrageous Gates performance. Midway, he releases a glass full of mosquitoes, saying, “Malaria is spread by mosquitoes. I brought some. Here, I’ll let them roam around. There is no reason only poor people should be infected.” Then he offered some reassurance, “Those mosquitoes are not infected.” (A blogger said, “I’m never sitting in the front row of a TED conference.”)

At TED, Gates moved from bad diseases to bad teachers, conceding, “There are fairly effective teachers in a narrow set of places. So the top 20 percent of students have gotten a good education.” He says the rest have weak teachers, “getting weaker.” He goes on to his favorite themes, debunking teacher experience and Master’s degrees (“Once somebody has taught for three years their teaching quality does not change thereafter.”)

Gates says there’s one place where good teachers are made: “KIPP is doing it.” Jim Horn discusses KIPP’s operation, reporting some specific disturbing events—and speaks to the broader issues of “transforming children of the urban poor into pliable future assets schooled in positivity and age-appropriate versions of corporate groupthink.” Bill Gates closes his TED speech by giving everyone in the audience a copy of Jay Mathews’s celebratory chronicle of KIPP. Mathews’s title tells it all: *Work Hard, Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America*. Gates received a standing ovation from an audience who could afford the \$7,500 tickets. (As TED is owned by the Sapling Foundation, a private 501(c)3 nonprofit foundation registered in the State of New York, \$5,000 of the TED Conference fee may be tax-deductible; Fair Market Value is \$2,500. Please check with your tax professional.)

In Chapter 6 “Disabusing Small-Schools Reformism: An Alternative Outlook on Scaling Up and Down,” Craig B. and Aimee Howley provide a fascinating “retrospective analysis” of the small-schools reform package supported by the Gates Foundation. The Howleys point out that in the 1970s small alternative schools created for high school students “who did not take to traditional schooling” concentrated on personalized learning, whereas schools operating under the Gates imprimatur had to swear fealty to “rigor,” the reformist shibboleth of the day.

I was one of two teachers in one of those schools. We were part of the public school system but our 44 students were either excluded from the high school or refused to go to it. Forced to be in school as a condition of probation, they came to us as a last resort. I found it interesting that the thing those students hated most about regular high

school was the bells: “I’d just get into something and the bell would ring and I’d have to go somewhere else.”

When we had a bridge building contest, Chuck’s toothpick truss bridge held 35 pounds of books. When an architectural student volunteer from the local university saw the bridge and told him they got to use pea connectors on their constructions, he groaned to me, “You made me do it the hard way.” But he was thrilled to realize he’d built a stronger version. He stood back and repeated several times, “I never knew I had the patience to do such a thing.” Only half a dozen students chose to do this project. Other students did other things. Studies at our school weren’t undertaken in the name of rigor but in the name of each individual student. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn’t.

School is about important ideas but those ideas must change for time and circumstance. And kid.

When things don’t work, you get up and try again. The Howleys point out, “The grander the scheme, the more extreme must be the subsequent denials. The ineptness is always denied, always blamed on whatever will best serve the circumstances: bad strategy, ignorant peasants and workers, enemies, human nature, or even bad genes.” This observation is footnoted to James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. The Howleys make repeated provocative reference to Scott. I ordered his book before finishing the chapter.

I have given short shrift to Chapters 7 through 12, but perhaps this has gone on long enough. I’ll close by offering a brief footnote to Chapter 8 “The Gates’ Foundation and the Future of U.S. Public Education: A Call for Scholars to Counter Misinformation Campaigns,” where Philip E. Kovacs and H. K. Christie call on the academic Left, “If there is such a body,” to do something about this mess. We all mourn the passing of Gerald Bracey. He was our Left, our academician, the fellow with a conscience who could analyze all those statistics, the one we could rely on to speak truth to power, and to do it loudly. Hardly a week goes by that I don’t hear a lament about how much we need Jerry to rebut the latest neoliberal dogma masquerading as data from one of the

so-called think tanks—not only rebut it but inform every education reporter in the universe of their duty to get the story right.

About the Reviewer

Susan Ohanian, a longtime teacher, is a Fellow at the Vermont Society for the Study of Education. She is a cofounder of Educator Roundtable. In addition, she is a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in periodicals ranging from the *Atlantic* and *Washington Monthly* to *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Education Week*. Susan is the recipient of The George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contributions to Honest and Clarity in Public Language, National Council of Teachers of English, 2003; The Kenneth S. Goodman "In Defense of Good Teaching" Award, College of Education, University of Arizona; and The John Dewey Award for Extraordinary Contributions to the Education of Young People in America (2006)



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