

BOOK REVIEW

Reclaiming the Right to the City: A Book Review of *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*¹

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In the past 30 years or so, the *neoliberal agenda* or, more generally, *neoliberalism* has forcefully pervaded the changing landscape of “urban” education and negatively influenced education policies; too often resulting in alarming negative consequences on the teaching and learning experiences of historically marginalized students and their communities. In her new book *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, Lipman (2011) describes neoliberalism as

an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient. Neoliberalism is not just “out there” as a set of policies and explicit ideologies. It has developed as a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it. (p. 6)

Throughout the book, Lipman demonstrates the negative consequences of neoliberalism by placing the reader in the middle of the current events in Chicago Public Schools as well as by providing a historical timeline that has led to its current troubling state of affairs. In this review, we provide a brief overview of Lipman’s

¹ Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York, NY: Routledge. pp. 208, \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-80224-6 http://www.routledge.com/catalogs/education_policy_and_politics/1/9/

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critique on urban education and the neoliberal agenda. We then make connections between Lipman's analysis and our own lived urban schooling experiences. We hope that each of our personal accounts offers insight into the power of neoliberalism and its detrimental effects on the nation's public education system—and its students.

The New Political Economy at a Glance

Throughout her latest book, Lipman (2011) takes great effort to make clear her points of concern. She begins with a comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism as the force that launched and continues to fuel society's actions to empower corporations. She continues by describing, in great detail, the destruction of what arguably is the last great public service that society has to offer—public education. Lipman presents an analysis detailing how public education is being obliterated across the country. She does so by documenting the historical footprint of the penetration of corporations into public education, highlighting efforts to thrust students into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.

Lipman (2011) chronologically frames her analysis and guides the reader through a revealing tour of the Chicago Public School System, which she describes as a “laboratory” for neoliberal policy experiments” (p. 23). She demonstrates how this misfortune of experimentation is nothing more than a carbon copy of what has occurred and continues to occur in cities across the nation. Lipman channels her personal knowledge of Chicago's past, critically assessing the educational reform efforts instituted by the city's policy-making team, and passionately argues for expanding critical research in this area of inquiry. Throughout the book, she illustrates the importance of her refusal to accept ideologies that support a neoliberal society. Lipman concludes the book by stressing that through diagnosis a prognosis is possible, and that every person has a role to play in the pursuit of social justice and the fight against corporate take-over. She advocates for every individual to become a change agent in her or his community so that we may collectively create equitable possibilities for students (and teachers) and improve the learning possibilities for all children in the nation's public schools.

Lipman (2011) clearly details her research efforts and analytical techniques so that the reader may appreciate her constructionist epistemology and critical agenda. The book contains seven chapters: (1) Introduction (2) Neoliberal Urbanism and Education Policy, (3) Dismantling Public Schools, Displacing African Americans and Latino/as, (4) Racial Politics of Mixed-Income Schools and Housing, (5) Venture Philanthropy, (6) Choice and Empowerment, and (7) Education and the Right to the City. Each chapter contributes to the overarching theme of the book: the need for a critical reexamination of the nation's public education system, particularly the policies that affect marginalized groups. Moreover, each

chapter provides a template for measuring the extraordinary quality of her critical analysis.

Lipman (2011) assists the reader in developing a relevant timeline and examining the relationship amongst the city, the citizens, and corporate America. Using Lipman's analysis as a compass, the reader is able to see a shift in the priorities of public policy over time: from improving the living conditions of all citizens in the 1970s, to growing U.S. corporate interests in the 1980s, to globalizing corporate America in the 1990s. The 2000s and beyond are characterized by the ongoing dismantling of the public sphere, including the public education system. Lipman's detailed fieldwork coupled with the prevailing nature of the current assault on public education makes this book a must read for those who wish to understand more deeply the complexities of urban education, including urban mathematics education.

Introspections on a Neoliberal Society

In the following section, we provide introspections on Lipman's (2011) book by presenting brief narratives of our own lived urban schooling experiences within a neoliberal society. Both narratives, we believe, exemplify the reality of the dangerously uncritical "new social imaginary" (p. 6) of neoliberalism.

Morgin's Introspection

As an African American woman living in a neoliberal society, Lipman's (2011) book compelled me to reconsider the daily challenges marginalized students face compared to my own public schooling experiences in Virginia Beach, Virginia. To some extent, I was aware of the racial complexities that impact our society, particularly in school settings. Throughout my schooling experiences, I quickly learned to negotiate the politics that constantly burden public education through the support of a family of educators. In high school, my accelerated courses were predominately occupied by White students; there were only a few African American students granted access to advanced courses. Together, my African American peers and I coped with the competitive nature of the schooling process, supporting each other's academic efforts and exceptional achievements along the way. The isolation that we felt in school was certainly indicative of a larger, more serious problem.

Reflecting upon my high school experiences brings back memories of students' individualistic attitudes. This individualism still pervades the culture as a trace of neoliberal values. Lipman's (2011) critical observations made me realize that public school education has been largely a training ground for neoliberal thought. My peers knew that in order to be considered successful they should at-

tend the nation's top colleges and universities—and a majority of White students did just that. For African American students, the expectations were slightly different. It was evident that we did not operate on a level playing field, but all students were expected to achieve academically and support, in one form or another, the agenda of capitalism. Due to the rise of corporate America, many students were encouraged to learn more about STEM initiatives and to pursue careers in those fields. Because of my early “grooming,” I decided to earn an undergraduate and master's degree in mathematics and applied mathematics, respectively. I forecasted my future career as a mathematician and banked on lucrative opportunities provided to me by the profession. The schooling experiences of today's students are not much different from my own: STEM fields are presented everywhere and by everyone as the key to success.

As a graduate of and undergraduate mathematics instructor at Spelman College, I empathize with the African American women that I teach each semester. In my role as an instructor at a historically Black college for women, I understand the impact of the neoliberal agenda on students' thinking inside my classroom. Lipman (2011) highlighted that “[social] policies are, in part, discourses—values, practices, ways of talking and acting—that shape consciousness and produce social identities” (p. 11). At the beginning of each semester, I ask my undergraduate mathematics students what they want to be when they “grow up” and why. More often than not, my students have declared or are thinking about declaring a major in the STEM fields, and I enthusiastically support their academic goals and professional aspirations. Nonetheless, I believe that some of these students may be simply perpetuating the ideals sustaining neoliberalism in this country as they acquire dreams of climbing the “corporate ladder.” It is clear that my undergraduate students have developed their own perceptions of what it means to live and survive in a neoliberal society, and consider Spelman College an ideal starting point on their journey to success.

Importantly, based on the selectivity of the institution, Spelman College attracts women from around the world. It is evident that my undergraduate students feel the pressure to align themselves with those undergraduate students who attend Ivy League colleges and universities. They believe that acquiring an undergraduate degree from Spelman will inevitably increase the brightness of their futures. While that might be true for some graduates, others may confront the sobering reality that they have to work much harder than White students because of the persistent limiting effects of racism (and patriarchy) within our society. It is important for undergraduate students to recognize how the neoliberal agenda operates in their school community, and in society at large. It is equally important that educators engage in teaching and learning practices that motivate students to enact change in the public sphere. Only then will there be possibilities for equitable education and opportunity for all. It is my hope that Lipman's (2011) voice will

inspire individuals to critically assess and bravely confront the ongoing issues within the U.S. educational system, and society at large.

Elijah's Introspection

As an African American male, growing up during the time period in which Lipman (2011) suggests that cities prioritized the citizenry (the 1970s), I remember my parents' accounts of receiving public assistance in terms of food, housing, and employment. The Civil Rights Acts had not long before been signed into law, and the nation was recovering from several riots across the country. I would say that my educational opportunities were top-notch. It is immaterial to debate if the opportunities made available to me by the city were obligatory or moral.

During the 1980s, I was directly impacted by the harmonious partnership amongst the Detroit Public School System, the Michigan Post-Secondary Educational System, and corporate America. Lipman (2011) reports that during this decade the cities focused on the growth of corporate America. Specifically, there was a major push to grow the mathematics, science, and technology fields in Detroit and throughout Michigan. As "The Motor City," money, opportunity, and momentum all intersected in Detroit during that time period. In large part, many of my friends and I are in STEM careers today due to the money, opportunity, and momentum created and invested in us during our school years. It can be argued that the number of minorities currently in STEM fields today is due directly to the efforts of cities like Detroit and what Lipman describes as the push to grow corporate America.

The globalization of corporate America, as Lipman (2011) calls it, was quite evident during the 1990s. I noticed this globalization effort as a member of a corporate team that trained workers in another country during the mid-1990s. I was employed for 15 years as an engineer for a major American computer company; for three of those years I trained workers in Europe to do the work that we were doing here in the United States. When I finished training the European workers, my entire department was moved to Europe. I was not privy to the consequences of my actions, but Lipman has provided a detailed analysis of the long-term effects of actions similar to mine and the efforts of thousands of others to globalize corporate America.

A major economic downturn occurred in the United States in the early 2000s: the burst of the dot-com bubble. The impact of my earlier global actions finally became clear to me and, as a result, I changed careers and entered the education field during the early 2000s. As Lipman (2011) points out, the beginning of the dismantling of public education can be specifically tracked to this time period, and I have experienced some part of its destruction every day since I became a teacher. The closing of schools, the lack of resources, the constant fluctuation of "standards," the infusion of charter schools, and the influence of funds, whether it

is from the federal government, corporate America, or philanthropic groups, all have had devastating effects on public education. As a high school mathematics teacher, I have witnessed firsthand the low morale that has developed among some of the teachers and students. I also have seen the high levels of frustration amongst teachers, which has led to scores of teachers retiring or exiting the profession. All of these claims are expounded upon in the cause and effect analysis of Lipman's research. If I were not on the inside experiencing everything that she has documented in her book, I might be tempted to believe that she has exaggerated her point. However, I am on the inside, and I see how these ideas are made manifest in urban settings. I applaud her activist scholarship.

Reclaiming the Right to the City

Together, we admire Lipman's (2011) examination of the relationship between the public education system and corporate America. She pushes the reader into deep self-reflection. Her discourse is penetrating and demands the reader to select a side: the empowerment of children, youth, and communities or the empowerment of corporations. Lipman gives the reader the necessary information to make an informed choice, providing her own evaluation, and making clear that simply sitting idly and observing the shifts in society makes known a person's choice. Her work details a gloomy tale, but she opens the reader's mind to the possibilities of change. Going forward, we ought to educate student learners about the power of neoliberalism and help them to better understand that "education is integral to a movement to reclaim the city" (Lipman, 2011, p. 161). As educators, we strongly believe that individuals must activate their own agency so that a critical mass aimed at "Reclaiming the City" can mobilize. This action, we believe, will result in a new political economy.

References

Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York, NY: Routledge.