

ERICKSON, M. Class War: The privatization of childhood. 2015

Sam Traves

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ERICKSON, M. *Class War: The privatization of childhood*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso. (2015). 230 pp. \$18.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-78168-948-6).

Megan Erickson's *Class War* is an in-depth analysis of the ways that liberal delusions of meritocracy maintain separate and unequal educational systems in the United States. These delusions, when combined with the fetishization of individual choice and its conflation with freedom, create choices only for those wealthy enough to pay for them. Erickson begins by exposing the increasing commercialization and inequality of contemporary American child-rearing. She details not only the excesses of upper-middle-class and wealthy parents for whom childhood and education are now individually curated experiences but of the middle-classes who in their scramble to secure the best for their offspring, often and perhaps unintentionally further the very social inequalities many profess to stand against. For those laboring under the delusion that increased educational opportunity can fix inequality, Erickson provides a well-needed remedy. *Class War* maps the ways that class and racial oppression are reproduced through education and provides a set of principles for what education liberated from not just corporatization, but capitalism can be.

Bringing her unique perspective as an educator in New York City Public Schools, one of the most highly segregated, unequal public-school systems in America and building on investigative work by journalists like Nikole Hannah-Jones, Erickson shows how private education, school choice policies, and funding structures produce *de facto* class and racial segregation. The result is that today, American students have not only separate and unequal school facilities, but also different security protocols, curricula, expectations, and sources for blame (Hannah-Jones, 2014). In one system, the children of the middle and upper classes often attend highly funded public schools in areas with high property values, charter schools with highly selective admissions standards, or private schools. In a separate system, poor, working-class and lower-middle-class children attend public schools with varying degrees of underfunding, in neighborhoods with low property values and a high proportion of renters, large class sizes, underpaid educators and a

general lack of resources. Importantly, Erickson emphasizes that these issues exist because segregation, discriminatory housing policies, and wealth inequality continue to worsen because of neoliberal school reform. These reform efforts, including school choice policies, divert attention and funding away from public education undermining the system they claim to reform.

Erickson has reframed the discussion about U.S. education in a way not addressed by liberal educational reformers pushing school choice policies, by technocrats with venture-capital-funded online educational programs, or by conservatives advocating for private education to replace an educational system they have carefully worked to underfund so that they declare public education a failure. *Class War* is not merely a catalog of the failures of these reform efforts and the adverse effects of meritocratic delusion; it is also a vision for an educational system that serves all children with compassion. She sees a future in which children are taught by well-compensated empathetic teachers and school staff in high quality, well-funded public schools. This is the vision that educators and support staff have been fighting for in recent waves of teacher strikes, kicked off by wildcat strikes in West Virginia chronicled by another former educator, Eric Blanc, in *Red State Revolt* (2019).

Continuing in the tradition of progressive education scholarship popularized by Marxist economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' (1976) groundbreaking work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Erickson argues that education reform cannot be limited to schools themselves but must include the external hierarchies that education reproduces. While school choice policies, corporatization efforts, and state-funded finance adjustments purport to fix an educational system that mirrors the class, sex, and racial oppression in the society around it under capitalism, Erickson reminds us that it is not, and cannot be, the remedy for that system. She is clear that the remedy requires us to remake the systems and institutions that reinforce inequality, treating housing as a universal right, removing private property taxes from funding streams, subsidizing childcare, and creating a national healthcare system that cares for all Americans.

Unlike other contemporary educators recording resistance to neoliberal education reform as Micah Uetricht did in *Strike for America*, Erickson reminds us that even if schools and educators win the kinds of battles educators and school staff are fighting for in the waves of recent strikes, it will do little to bridge the gap between rich and poor students if we do not address the broader systemic injustices that produce (and reproduce) inequality. U.S. education policy has been carefully shaped over the last hundred years to create the current two-tiered system we have today, divided not only by race but by class.

Erickson does not just expose efforts to resist corporatization, white supremacy, class oppression, and the myths of meritocracy on education — she provides a courageous vision for the future of U.S. education liberated from capitalism. The innovation of *Class War* is that it is both a chronicle of our systemic ills and

a manifesto for our future. Its strength lies in Erickson's ability to blend the two forms providing us with a map of our past and present, but more importantly, an inspiring blueprint for the creation of a genuinely equitable education system. *Class War* is an excellent primer for students or new education researchers working outside the dominant framework of education reform interested in education policy at the intersection of racial segregation and class inequality in the U.S. It offers both an overview of how economic inequality functions in various aspects of the education system, and how this inequality interacts with existing class and racial segregation.

SAM TRAVES *McGill University*

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