

Peter Fortin

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Shock and Bourgeois: Milton Friedman's Grand Design for New Orleans School Reform

In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans, displacing or killing over a million people and devastating the city's housing and public infrastructure. By 2014, the district administering most schools in New Orleans became entirely charter based, eclipsing the public system it had before the hurricane (Greenblat). How did such a radical change occur over such a short period? The answer lies in a 2005 op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* by Milton Friedman, the "grand guru" of neoliberalism, wherein, as a capstone to his lifelong project of erecting a global state of *laissez-faire* capitalism, he argued that the destruction caused by Katrina was an "opportunity" to be seized by those with a desire to privatize the education system (Klein 4; Friedman "The Promise of Vouchers"). Friedman's article demonstrates the criticality of two effects the reforms needed to enact, the craven exploitation of the crisis' cataclysmic reverberations as dissected in Naomi Klein's 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, and the surgical dismantling of the teachers' unions who would otherwise serve as the only bulwark against the invisible stranglehold of the market. That these goals were achieved during the restructuring of the New Orleans school system evidences the role Friedman's article played in scaffolding the project and dooming the children of Louisiana to over a decade of abysmal education and lost potential.

Charter schools are privately owned schools which are open to the public but operate outside of the regulatory laws binding ordinary public schools (“Charter School”). School vouchers are a system whereby private and charter schools siphon tax funding from public schools by redistributing those funds to parents in the form of a voucher redeemable as tuition for a school of their choice (“School Vouchers”). This siphoning of resources severely diminishes those public schools’ abilities to provide quality education compared to the extra funding it affords private and charter schools. Proponents of voucher systems argue that they allow parents the freedom to make choices about their children’s education and as a result competitive market forces will coerce an increase in the overall quality of education across the board (Friedman *Capitalism and Freedom* 89-91). In 2003, the Louisiana State Legislature set up the Recovery School District (RSD) to requisition and rehabilitate failing school districts, and by 2015 90% of the schools in New Orleans were charter schools overseen by the RSD, each run by their own private entity (“Recovery School District”; Mirón and Lauria 3-4; Greenblat). Friedman’s 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article “The Promise of Vouchers” makes the argument that the then ravaged New Orleans school system was the perfect experiment to test charter based reforms, and ends with a clarion call expressing the concrete changes needed for the project to succeed: “If, by a political miracle, Louisiana could overcome the opposition of the unions and enact universal vouchers, it would not only serve itself, it would also render a service to the rest of the country by providing a large scale example of what the market can do for education when permitted to operate,” (Friedman “The Promise of Vouchers”). To the letter, this is the plan that was followed by those restructurors, or, as Diane Ravitch calls them in her 2020 book *Slaying Goliath*, those disrupters, who were so hellbent on profiteering in the hurricane’s wake.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein describes a theory of neoliberal economic reforms which she refers to as “disaster capitalism,” and central to this theory is the strategy of “waiting for a major crisis, then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens [are] still reeling from the shock, then quickly making the ‘reforms’ permanent,” (Klein 6). Capitalizing on the state of paralytic shock the citizens of New Orleans were in immediately after Katrina was necessary for the disrupters, for that state *was* the “opportunity” of which Friedman spoke, since, in his view, “only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change,” (qtd. in Klein 6). When those who were affected were most vulnerable, when their stewards were scrambling to administer triage, there could be no resistance to a bureaucratic takeover of something as seemingly removed from the moment as the public schools. For the disrupters, the plan of attack was to dissuade the rebuilding of the New Orleans school system and instead use relief money to “empower consumers, i.e., the students, by providing parents with vouchers” for charter schools (Friedman “The Promise of Vouchers”). However, the real objective was long term: New Orleans was merely, as the *New York Times* put it, a “laboratory” in which results demonstrating the efficacy of these reforms could be produced, a view in line with the end of Friedman’s op-ed (qtd. in Klein 5). Employing “contemporary capitalism’s core nostrum” was the only realistic way the reforms could be enacted (Klein 6); without the shock, there would be too much resistance from those who wished to keep democratic control of the schools alive, like the teachers’ unions.

The unions, then, would be a problem for the disrupters, since organized labor is the panacea for exploitative privatization, and Friedman alludes to this in his op-ed as well. Unions serve as a democratic voice in the workplace, summoning a force which is greater than the sum of its parts to the negotiating table and allowing for groups of otherwise atomized workers to

voice their concerns and collectively advocate for their own protection. The removal of this organized labor in the schools was immediate, with “the unilateral dismissal of over 7,000 public school employees” who were members of the United Teachers of New Orleans union (Mirón and Lauria 4). This usurpation of democratic control over the school systems was in stark contrast to the history of organized labor in Louisiana, and as Mirón and Lauria point out, “[i]t took a perfect storm to undue a populist culture harking back to the Huey Long era,” (Mirón and Lauria 3). When unions are kept out of the negotiation process, the workers no longer have the leverage to collectively bargain and often fail to secure an acceptable level of compensation and workplace dignity. With this protection gone, most teachers were forced out of their professional and personal communities as the newly instituted charter schools refused to hire them back, instead hiring “young white college graduates from out of state, trained for five weeks by Teach for America,” (Ravitch 195). The violent upheaval of the school system forced those teachers lucky enough to be offered a new job into the frantic choice between assimilating to the new status quo or withering in its obnubilation.

What has been the outcome of this disaster capitalism? Proponents of vouchers and charter schools point to initial increases in academic test scores by students enrolled in the RSD schools as a sign of success, yet as of 2019 Louisiana still finds itself touching the bottom of national testing metrics (“State Profiles”). From 2014 to 2019, the disintegration of any lead the RSD run New Orleans schools had over their “competition” had begun, with test scores falling below the State average, graduation rates plunging to the lowest in the State, and a bifurcation skewering internal district results along socio-economic lines as poorer, non-white students were sequestered to the underperforming charters (Ravitch 195-197); a sardonic twist of fate for the prospects of “school choice.” Sarah Knopp explains in her article “Charter schools and the attack

on public education” why any purported relationship between higher test scores and charter schools is illusory: money. Charter schools do not universally outperform public schools, and in the cases in which they do it is because the charter schools have access to more money to spend on their students, something overperforming private schools have as well (Knopp). There are no miraculous market forces at play, no invisible hand of competition raising the quality of education; the schools with more money to spend on their students end up with higher test scores, and siphoning funds from public schools via vouchers ensures the charter and private schools end up with more money. In the case of Louisiana and the Recovery School District, this inequity has led to a substandard quality of education which has not risen to meet the needs of the communities who were so blighted by Katrina and the fetid disaster capitalism which followed.

Just as Friedman’s article predicted, a service was rendered to the rest of the country by the wholesale privatization of these schools. We now see what the market can do for education, and it’s not much. Seventeen years after Katrina decimated New Orleans and those in power sold the school system to their corporate cronies, its citizens are still struggling to receive the bare minimum of an education and those with gilded tentacles continue to enrich themselves. Milton Friedman may be rotting in his grave, but the free-market death cult he spent a lifetime catalyzing slithers onwards.

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