

Revolution at the Margins by Frederick M. Hess

In *Revolution at the Margins* (Brookings Institute: Washington, 2002), University of Virginia scholar Rick Hess discusses how urban school systems are affected by pro-competition reforms. From three case studies, he argues that the current conceptions and discussions about competition are ‘facile’, and that what is needed is a ‘more nuanced consideration of the way education competition works in practice’. Based on these case studies, Hess argues, more attention should be given to the context and circumstance of education reforms, with such reforms often delivering much less than promised.

The first three Chapters of the book serve as a review of the literature and prelude to the case studies. Hess also offers an exposition of the key ideas. But here, unfortunately, the style is light on terminology and heavy on metaphors; and the analytical framework is incomplete. The terms ‘competition’, ‘choice’, and ‘voucher’ are not straightforward. A voucher can be described in terms of its finance and eligibility stipulations, and a political bargain can be made – and ideological opposition defused – by changing these stipulations. The metaphors are also opaque: market reforms are rendered either as a ‘pick-ax’ or a ‘bulldozer’. To this reader, neither metaphor was easy to conjure with: not only is Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ more evocative, but Schumpeter’s notion of ‘creative destruction’ is obviously more complex than a bulldozer. Plus, Economics textbooks devote full sections to explaining the theory of the market, replacing the search for one good metaphor with ideas such as barriers to entry or price discrimination. Regarding the analytical framework, the author relegates equity and the public purposes of schooling to ‘Other Concerns’ in the school choice debate (pp. 27-29). But, these are not minor issues (even if some groups – such as teacher unions – may use arguments about equity in a self-serving and dissembling manner).

The next four Chapters describe the case studies of urban school choice reform. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program gets two Chapters, followed by one each on the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program and on the privately-financed Children’s Educational Opportunity Horizon program in San Antonio. These are genuinely interesting stories, based on the author’s expansive investigation, of what it takes and does not take to generate choice reforms in urban school systems. Both the political and ideological commitments of interested parties are nicely highlighted, along with the financial imperatives that shape such reforms.

Chapter 8 draws together the general lessons from these three case studies. The first lesson is that not much has changed in the face of these reforms – perhaps not surprisingly given the tiny fraction of students affected. The second is that much of the reforms were politicized – this harks back to John Chubb and Terry Moe’s *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* (Brookings Institute: Washington, DC, 1990). The third lesson Hess draws is that reform comes from characters imbued with either work-embracing impulses, mountain-climbing impulses, or missionary zeal. Unfortunately, these characters are probably all in short supply.

The final Chapter returns to the metaphors of the pick-ax and the bulldozer, either sharpening the former or unchaining the latter. But the options are not systematically compared, and as late as page 233, for example, we learn that there are two ‘visions of the bulldozer’: one as viewed by the standards movement and one by *laissez-faire* adherents. These viewers have complex intellectual and ideological roots, and possibly contrary agendas (cultural conservatives are not libertarians). Their introduction to the discussion at this juncture is perplexing, with the author himself asserting that “it is unclear whether market advocates really wish to embrace choice-driven competition” (241). Yet it appears that many – both pro-market and anti-market – in fact have very clear wishes, as may indeed be inferred from the ideological and political struggles described in this book.

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