

***The Ideology of Education
The Commonwealth, the Market, and America's Schools***
KEVIN B. SMITH
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It is disappointing to concede this, but much research in education has the appearance of being 'political' or 'ideological'. Yet, it is hard to cite research, use research, or build on previous research, when you suspect the results are biased in any form. Kevin Smith's short book, *The Ideology of Education*, at least begins by conceding that this bias is important and significant. Unfortunately, it fails to use evidence and argument in a way that would insulate it from the criticisms levelled at others.

Smith's main idea is to juxtapose the market and the commonwealth, i.e. the 'private' versus the 'public'. Smith codifies the tension between these two concepts nicely in terms of the respective values, mission, and conceptions of what education is for (Chapter 1). At issue is the balance between market and commonwealth imperatives, and how to weigh this balance.

Smith sets out an evaluative framework for market reforms in terms of economic outcomes for students; educational opportunities; and civic goals (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). These criteria cover much of the material; and Smith's review is a welcome relief from some of the triumphal statements made in favor of markets. However, there is no real discussion of either efficiency or of freedom of choice, yet these are key drivers for markets: Milton Friedman, a libertarian, wants parents to have freedom of choice; conservative Economists want schools to be efficient from the taxpayer's perspective. In failing to adequately assess these two claims, Smith's arguments are not fully persuasive in their (implicit) attempt to reset the balance in favor of the commonwealth. Right or wrong, the economic pressures for markets merit inquiry.

In his consideration of the link between education and the economy, Smith concludes "culture" to be more important than education in determining economic success; education is really a way of "smuggling values" that validate a market society. Even if this conclusion is correct, one might argue that it has little purposive value: individuals can do little about culture, but they can enroll in school for an extra year. It is further disappointing to find – later in the book – that education is an important influence on culture itself. However, in this review much of the relevant literature in the economics of education is not discussed (including some which supports Smith's conclusion). Ironically, this omission of a large body of evidence is the type of selective inquiry that leaves researchers open to charges of bias.

Another way in which bias appears in education research is in the differential treatment of others' findings. Smith criticises the extant empirical literature for measurement error, construct invalidity, and weak identification strategies; to some degree, these criticisms are valid. But he then follows this with empirical estimations of his own that are equally susceptible. (Indeed, many

readers might see less measurement error in the construct 'years of education' than in the construct 'culture').

Smith's review of the education production function (EPF) literature also invokes methodological problems, concluding that "money does not matter is as much a political claim as it is an empirical claim" (p.53). This is true, only in the sense that any empirical claim is a political claim – it seems here that claims which the author disagrees with are 'political'. Again, there are problems with the EPF literature, but the appropriate response is to set down these problems in peer-reviewed journals and not to dismiss the evidence as "political". Indeed, Smith's own emphasis on culture offers a simple explanation of why money does not matter: institutional culture is such that any additional resources are not allocated to best effect.

Commendably, Smith conducts a lot of his own empirical analysis in his investigation of educational equality and culture. This provides novel information on how cultural factors influence educational processes and outcomes. In general, Smith's book nicely identifies the balancing needed to weigh the public and private purposes of education (and in way that is certainly no more hortatory than much of the literature on education markets). Unfortunately, all education researchers need to set high methodological standards to avoid charges of ideological motivation. This is a difficult task. Simply raising the issue of 'ideology' is not enough.

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