Education and Consumerism;
Or,
"The Customer" Is Always Wrong

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As I was finishing my graduate studies over fifteen years ago, I met with the Dean of my graduate school, who explained to me that he wanted to meet with everyone completing their program, to make sure that all had gone well for them and that they considered themselves "satisfied customers." I replied that I did not consider myself a customer at all—I did not think of myself as a consumer of my graduate education, or of my education a commodity. I went on to say that it seemed to me mistaken and dangerous to apply to the exigencies of education the cultural logic of late capitalism.

I was surprised at the Dean's response. He immediately and amiably backed away from his application of customer service to graduate studies. Now, I don't imagine that my argument was so overwhelmingly compelling that it altered all at once his administrative vision of things. Rather, I had the impression that he spoke of "satisfied customers" not because he was committed to that model on principle, but because that way of speaking was so obvious and easy. Almost every other cultural enterprise seems to proceed, naturally and necessarily, according to this dominant cultural logic. It is, so to speak, a custom-made metaphor. But the Dean seemed not to insist upon it, and let me get my degree in spite of my impertinence.

Almost ten years ago, at the independent school at which I was finishing a stint of school teaching before moving on to a college job, in a meeting near the end of the year, the faculty was told by the Director of Admissions that their job was to remember that the school had customers it had to keep happy. The job was complicated by the fact that there were few enough customers coming that they all had to be kept from leaving. The Headmaster, speaking next, and commending the Admissions Director for her efforts, explained that the way for us to do our jobs was to teach our curriculum according to our mission. I wanted to ask the Admissions Director, "Do you really believe that the people who come to our school are customers, and that teachers have to satisfy them? Or is that just a way of talking about admission and retention that seems fitting because it is so familiar?" And I wanted to ask the Headmaster, "Is it true, then, that the mission of the school is still more important than the marketing? Or are mission statements—and Headmasters' comments upon them—merely part of the marketing?" But here I was not impertinent enough to speak up, perhaps because I already knew the answers to my questions and the consequences of the answers.

For if school and college administrators speak of students and their parents as "customers" only because that is a manner of speaking; and even if they know that it is only a manner of speaking, and that the means and ends of education are not really comprehended by consumerism; it is nevertheless the case that students and their parents have often bought into it, and that educators have tended to let them. Most private

schools, and more and more colleges, are tuition-driven: they have to struggle to attract applicants and to retain those who enroll. This is even more true now than it was ten years ago. In public schools, and in the colleges of education that train their teachers, there seems to be no critical resistance to, or even recognition of, the assimilation of education to consumption. Teaching and learning have everywhere, under these conditions, become educationally commodified, with students and their parents the sovereign consumers. This turns learned teachers, educational professionals, into mere service industry workers. Parents who pay taxes or tuition consider that they pay teachers' salaries, and so can tell them how to teach their children. Administrators are to see to it that the teachers do as they are told. The children themselves, informed as they are by the same consumptive presumptions, demand an education that appeals to their unformed tastes and engages their uncritical interests. When their education does not give them satisfaction, their parents, who in every other way enable and indulge their pop-cultural mass-consumption, are ready to second their objections, all convinced alike that the customer is always right.

I do not mean to say that students and parents are always wrong about what they want in an education. I do mean that it is always wrong to consider them customers. My point is that where education has been taken over, however inadvertently, by the culture of consumption, it has given up on the sort of cultural criticism and pedagogical reflection that is necessary if education is to fulfill its still-official mission. Neither the public sector in which public schools offer a free education for all, nor the public sphere in which private schools operate not for profit, is supposed to be organized or governed according to the cultural logic of late capitalism. A critical resistance to educational consumerism must be undertaken by teachers who are expert in the arts and sciences and supported by their administrative supervisors. They must teach parents as well as students that education is concerned with the formation of decent and complete human beings, not merely productive and consumptive getters and spenders; that the end of college preparation is success at a suitable college, not mere admission to a selective one; and that this sort of high school and higher education is now actually the one most likely to prepare young people for satisfying work with satisfactory pay over the course of long lives in a complex world. The properly productive work of education must be permitted to question its consumption by the larger and more popular culture; it must generate and disseminate ideas and arguments that can maintain teaching and unleash learning. All involved, when pressed, would surely agree that more goes on in good schools and colleges than just the buying of an education to then sell to an employer.