

Beyond left and right: revelations from the Common Core debate

By Steven C. Ward
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A paradoxical situation seems to confront today's political scene and the choices it generates.

On the one hand, the market and its particular logic have come to dominate more and more human affairs. Even after the Great Recession and the documented failures of this logic, we continue to be told of the need to bring a market rationality to solve a host of public problems – from the “crises” in public education to the efficient delivery of mail.

On the other hand, the state – the occasional counterbalance to market swings and excesses – has become more business-oriented itself. Today's state is attempting to rationalize, audit and assess all public expenditures and “nudge” people toward particular types of market appropriate behavior. This can be seen in attempts to offload more of the cost of a university education in order to reduce tax burdens, create efficiencies and make students more responsible and risk-aware.

The upshot is that the tension between market and state that once was more overt seems now to have dissolved. The boundaries between the two at times seem indeterminate.

This paradoxical state of contemporary politics can be observed in the current debate over the [Common Core](#) and standardized testing.

An emblematic debate over Common Core

Common Core has been readily condemned on both sides of the political spectrum.

On the one hand, there are individuals such as academic Diane Ravitch and schoolteacher Mercedes Schneider, and organizations like the National Education Association and the Chicago Teachers' Union. They deplore the testing mania, the push to privatization, and the excessive influence of venture philanthropies such as the Gates and Walton Foundations on education policy as well as the loss of teacher autonomy they believe Common Core generates.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum are people such as Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, TV host Glen Beck and Senator Rand Paul and groups like FreedomWorks and the libertarian Cato Institute. They condemn Common Core as a power grab by the federal

government. They see it as a part of the government's efforts to further nationalize education and indoctrinate children.

Adding to this Common Core confusion is a great motley mixture of supporters, ranging from Jeb Bush, the Business Roundtable and Conservatives for Higher Standards to former DC Schools Chancellor Michele Rhee, the National Governors Association, the Southern Poverty Law Center and, somewhat tentatively and timidly, the American Federation of Teachers.

What, then, does Common Core's reconfiguration of the usual right and left political positioning signal about the state of contemporary politics in the US?

Beyond left and right

Explaining these unlikely alliances and divisions over education policy requires a very different understanding from the usual liberal versus conservative framework that has come to dominate our thinking on political matters in the US.

For the last few decades a new political model has been unfolding in various places around the world, one that brings together an activist, pro-market state that has intensified its monitoring of public agencies with a less regulated and more expansive market. Or, put it another way, what we are seeing emerge is a highly regulated public realm coupled with a highly deregulated private realm.

In this new configuration we encounter what I would call a "worst of both worlds situation." Markets expand into what was previously the public domain and go largely unchecked in order to stimulate the never ending pursuit of growth and accumulation. Meanwhile, thanks to [public choice theory](#) (which gives material interest priority) and new forms of public management in institutions like schools, the public sector – and the people in it such as teachers or government workers – are no longer trusted by governments. As a result, they are increasingly monitored and managed from above instead of from within their own professional ranks.

It is in this newly created political space that the strange politics of Common Core are currently playing out.

Strange bedfellows

In the resistance to Common Core we are seeing the emergence of a style of politics that links libertarians who fear the increased intrusion of the state with the anti-corporatist activists who fear the growing dominance of the market.

Interestingly, this is similar to the situation that emerged in the 1930s that resulted in political coalitions between those Americans who feared the intrusions of state-centered socialism like Nazism and Soviet Communism and those who protested the the growing economic inequality that resulted in the Great Depression. These coalitions were ultimately responsible for launching the social liberalism that came to dominate American politics for almost fifty years.

More recently such a political take can be found in Ralph Nader's new book *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State* and his rather astonishing appearance over the summer at the Cato Institute.

The debate over Common Core reveals, to my mind, that the Occupy Movement and Tea Party both have valid points to make in their critiques of contemporary political scene. In America democratic participation has been usurped. Power today has become centralized in the hands of both the market and state. Politically speaking, it is simply a matter of which centralizing power one focuses on in a given moment.

The political story of Common Core is dramatic proof that the real problem is both.