

The Death of the Olmstedian Vision of Public Space

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"Privatization: An End to the Parks and Recreation Profession as we Know it," the title of an article by Gary Lane (1997), a practitioner in the public sector, is a plea for and strategy by which public parks and recreation departments can fend off private sector entrees to more "efficiency" (a word that we will return to presently) deliver parks and recreation services to the general citizenry. Lane's strategy is not a defense of public parks and recreation service delivery, but a vision that would operationally privatize the same. Or, as Lane (1997) stated it: "we must . . . operate our leisure time services [public sector] as a business" (p. 8). Lane (1997) would transform public parks and recreation service delivery by requiring its practitioners to have at minimum "a minor in business . . . attend business seminars and marketing conferences, become members of the chamber of commerce, [and] become accomplished salespersons" (pp. 8; 15). Further, he suggested that "recreation advisory boards" be discarded and replaced with "business advisory councils" (Lane, 1997, p. 15). Lane (1997) understood the nature of advice the business council might impart, as he recognized that governments privatize "as a means to decrease their immense payrolls, utilities, high union scale wages and benefits" (p. 8). Lane treats these worker losses benignly, while Rosenzweig and Blackmar (1992), in their voluminous history of Central Park, understood that privatization of New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation programs and services, "would [result in] reduced wages and benefits, thus eroding the major gains that unionized park workers had won in the post war years" (p. 508). The decisions a business advisory council makes would narrow citizen economic rights by narrowing the participant base and adversely impacting employee payroll and benefits and delimit political actions to the business constituency. This is one aspect of the privatization process Lane is proffering—the attenuation of the democratic process.

Although Lane does not explicitly extol democracy's diminution, others do. Drawing his inspiration from the Disney and MacDonald's Corporations, Joseph Curtis (1990) effusively endorses contracting out public parks and recreation services as a mechanism whose salutary value lies in its ability to preempt public involvement in the establishment of their own (public) parks and recreation policy.

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It would remove, to a great extent, recreation's future development from the foibles and unpredictability of local and regional political elections, candidates' muddling of policies and philosophies, citizen anti-tax rebellions, and the two-to four-year administrative upheavals as new men and women are periodically elected to public office . . .

The prime advantage of the McRec concept is the fact that once the decision to enter such a contract is made by the local agency or municipality, all details of staff, program, color, quality, new facilities, and so forth would be in the hands of career professionals and specialists. Continued affirmation of the contract would assure that this same high professional quality and effectiveness would be maintained consistently, despite local political skirmishes and fire-fights that might occur. (p. 57)

Although Curtis does not use the very word, indeed, today's privatization mantra, "efficiency," which recommends privatization over public sector delivery of services, we can glean from his and Lane's arguments the central tenants of what is meant by the "efficiency" of privatization. Not only does privatization cut costs by curtailing employee rights and benefits, downsizing personnel and relying on more temporary staff, it downsizes democracy, the very process by which employee and citizen rights can be protected. Stated more directly, the most attractive feature of a privatized efficiency is its ability to rid service delivery of the "inefficiency" of democracy. But it is the so-called "inefficiency" of democracy—debate and dialogue regarding social policy—in which inheres the potentiality for the creation of a civic bond, the lost community that left, right and center acknowledge as having been lost. In fact, one of Lane's privatization suggestions, marketing, is evidence for the loss of democratic discourse, as it is only necessary in organizations that do their planning internally, and then in an attempt to inform or persuade the excluded, the disenfranchised citizen in our discussion, marketing is used to sell pre-established policy and programs. Public discourse via marketing (a one-way transmission of information from private entities to consumers) reproduces a privatized society by discovering or manufacturing differences and then reinforcing these differences by selling to these "niches." Privatization forecloses democratic, collective and community activity by emphasizing and promoting disparity, while democracy allows an identification of human commonalities. Thus, marketing produces few generators of information, but many passive recipients, while democracy has the potentiality of actively engaging all the citizenry.

Privatization is a consumer approach to public service delivery and the argument made by Milton Friedman and others that a privatized system provides better customer service than nonprofit systems, even if true (See Paco Underhill's (1999) recent book, *Why we buy: The science of shopping*, to see the fallacy of this argument) distracts from the fundamental point, that the service to be developed in a democracy is the competent citizen not the "savvy" consumer. Citizen development, or more broadly, community development, can only occur once citizens directly set policy on which their community services are based. Services in a democracy cease to be administratively

planned and delivered services from which taxpayers, constituencies, and electorate, in sum, consumers, or that newly developed corporate analog, "stakeholders," expect, in Lane's (1997) words, "more bang for their buck" (p. 8), but the cultural activity and fabric of genuine community in which citizens have high expectations of themselves and each other. The efficiency of community is determined by its progress at extending democratic participation to more and more of the citizenry. Privatization's efficiency is measured in attenuating democratic participation.

Many services provided by government, social services specifically, are very often in place as the result of social struggles of the past. Struggles against the private sector which would not provide worker benefits, child labor protections, minimum wages, social security, shorter working day, et-cetera. Social work was a means to compensate for the most sinister social inadequacies of the private market system, and to turn the social services into privatized services means the demise of democratic and collective gains. The anti-democratic and inhumane effects of privatization are evinced in contemporary examples, both outside and internal to our field.

To proceed with examples outside the parks and recreation arena is at once to encounter the infinite, so let me use the business section of the day's New York Times, which features a story on the U.S. Health Insurance Industry's entry into Latin America. Harvard School of Public Health Director, William C. Hsiao, explained the approach to privatized health care: "Private health plans in these countries compete by selecting the best risks—recruiting predominantly young and healthy members and avoiding people who would be likely to need costly treatments" (Freudenheim & Krauss, 1999, p. C1). In keeping with the "best risk" strategy, "the insurance companies take the cream off the top: employees of banks, high-tech companies, large multinationals . . . [and] they do not operate in the countryside where health services have always been sparse" (Freudenheim & Krauss, 1999, pp. C1 & C8). Moreover, health care businesses find Latin America attractive because "unlike the United States market, the private insurance market . . . is not closely regulated (read as the absence of consumer/citizen protections) [allowing] revenues of private health care companies . . . in Latin America [to] grow much faster than in the United States" (Freudenheim & Krauss, 1999, p. C8). Consequently, the internal logic of privatization (actual capitalism) is recognized by Antonio Palocci, a public health doctor in Brazil, who "worr[ies] about foreign groups coming in, because they might view health care more as a business than a basic service" (Freudenheim & Krauss, 1999, p. C8). Shortly after, Dr. Palocci's very concerns were validated by a research team from Harvard University and Public Concern, an advocacy group in Washington. The research team found that "patients enrolled in profit-making health insurance plans are significantly less likely to receive the basics of good medical care . . . than those in not-for-profit plans" (Stolberg, 1999, A18). A primary author of the report, Dr. David Himmelstein, Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard University Medical School, summed up the results of privatization of U.S. Health Care: "We have had

a decade or more of policies aimed at making health care a business, and they have failed" (Stolberg, 1999, A18).

The consequences of privatization are standard whether limited to an industry or applied to a national economy. So as Costa Rica moves to privatize state social services, what is called dismantling the welfare state in order to cast privatization the white knight, "increasingly, those with money are turning to doctors in private practice, sending their children to private schools, and hiring private security guards for protection" (Rohter, 1996, p. A10). Carlos Sojo, a researcher at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, described privatization's effects: "The mechanisms of social integration are deteriorating, and the possibilities of social segregation are growing" (Rohter, 1996, p. A10). Similarly, as Germany moved to dismantle its welfare state, the mechanisms by "which capitalism's harshest features are tempered" (Cowell, 1996, p. 1) and workers' rights as protected by collective bargaining, must go, a New York Times front page story announced. "Germans have traditionally settled . . . by forging agreement: employees, unions and the government sit around a table to discuss . . . wages, benefits and working conditions. Then they resolve the issues in an evenhanded fashion" (Friedrich, 1996, p. A17), as described by the chief economist of Dresdner Bank Group. But democratic dialogue must be replaced with the privatization model of decision-making, "like the United States" (Friedrich, 1996, p. A17). [Germany must] abandon the need to make everyone happy [and] reduce sick pay and [grant] fewer job guarantees" (Friedrich, 1996, p. A17). Further, concluded Klaus Friedrich, "German companies also need more flexibility. They must be able to set their own management policies . . . rather than being legally tied to region-wide or sector-wide agreements that govern hiring, firing and wage policies" (Friedrich, 1996, p. A17). Democracy is clearly at odds with privatization as Eugene Weber also observed in a reference to the French people's opposition to privatization of social services in their country: "France is a blocked society . . . a democracy where freedom to criticize hinders freedom of enterprise" (Weber, 1998, p. A25). To repeat, privatization's prized efficiency is that it is not encumbered by democratic decision-making.

The results of privatization in our field are similar and instructive relative to democracy's future, if we are receptive. The New York City Public Plaza Law in which private developers were allowed "to increase the square footage of their buildings by 20 percent if they include . . . public spaces—has produced only uninviting public areas" (Stewart, 1999, p. B6). Stewart, quoting Fred Kent, the President of the Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit planning and design company in Manhattan, who suggested that "in the 38 years of its existence, the . . . law has been a dismal failure" (Stewart, 1999, p. B6). Mr. Kent explained that corporations designed "plazas that . . . repel people" (Stewart, 1999, p. B6). Stewart observed "that many were designed to discourage lingering, to shoo workers back to their offices and pedestrians back to the sidewalk—and, certainly to keep homeless people from making themselves at home" (Stewart, 1999, p. B6). If Stewart's information is not

explicit enough to render the term public plaza a misnomer, then a plaque on a midtown corporate headquarters most certainly is: "Public space, owned and maintained by AT&T" (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992, p. 509). Rosenzweig and Blackman (1992) quote the architectural critic Paul Goldberger: "These new and privately owned public spaces have become an artificial substitute for a true public realm" (p. 509). Translation, without a genuine "commons," democracy's nucleus, the body politic succumbs to this fatal cancer.

What is occurring to public space across America is what Mike Davis (1992) has called "the death of . . . the Olmstedian vision of public space" (p. 227). Davis (1992) observed, correctly, that "in the wake of Manhattan's 'commune' of 1863, the Great Draft Riot, he [Olmsted] conceived public landscapes and parks as social safety valves, mixing classes and ethnicities in common (bourgeois) recreations and enjoyments" (p. 227). Davis (1992) goes on in stark detail to substantiate his contention that Olmsted's "reformist vision of public space—as the emollient of class struggle . . . is now . . . obsolete [and] in regards to the mixing of classes, contemporary Urban America is more like Victorian England than Walt Whitman's or LaGuardia's New York (p. 227).

It may be that when the primary purpose of a social service is as "emollient" for an existing class system, it then provides the time for the system to extend itself and infest its preservants. It would seem natural and progressive to model yourself after the privatized, corporatized system you have served as guardian. The privatization of public parks and recreation services is not to be feared or avoided, but to be welcomed and encouraged, for it is the master we have served for so long.

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