

Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded Our Schools by Catherine Gidney

Ryan D. Jacobs

Volume 112, numéro 2, fall 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072245ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072245ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Jacobs, R. D. (2020). Compte rendu de [*Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded Our Schools* by Catherine Gidney]. *Ontario History*, 112(2), 265–267.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1072245ar>

Captive Audience

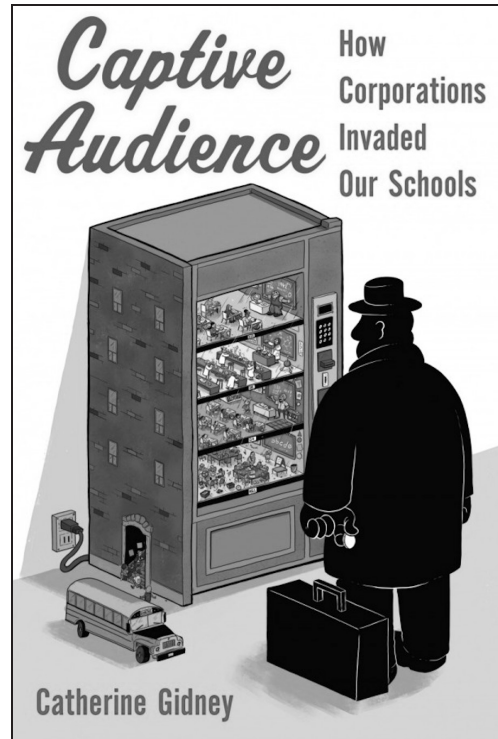
How Corporations Invaded Our Schools

By Catherine Gidney

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019. 220 pages. \$27.95 softcover. ISBN 978-1-77113-426-2 (btlbooks.com)

In her new book, *Captive Audience*, Catherine Gidney adds her voice to the groundswell of concern over the growing pervasiveness of corporate influence in North American public schools. She argues that the gradual normalization of corporate involvement has negatively impacted teaching and learning, and constitutes evidence of the perils of unbridled consumerism. Companies have long embedded themselves in education, and this book skilfully traces the history of their expanding influence.

Gidney contextualizes the proliferation of corporatization, which has accelerated since the 1990s, by outlining how “corporate advertisers and marketers gained a solid foothold within schools” (26). She cites the almost comical example of Neilson’s sponsored maps, featuring chocolate bars like Jersey Milk and Crispy Crunch, which were present in 60 per cent of Canadian schools by the 1950s (7-8). The economic uncertainty of the 1970s and 1980s, and the resulting reduction of public investment in education, produced an atmosphere in which many assumed that corporate involvement in public schools would yield positive results. This initially took the form of partnerships (ch. 2), “longer-term, mutually beneficial relationships” (38) such as York Region’s



arrangement with Hewlett-Packard. Students worked at HP and gained “real world skills” (42), while HP received a range of benefits and seats on school advisory committees. Objectives for such company-school partnerships included putting the latest technology in classrooms (ch. 3) and preparing students to compete effectively in an increasingly global marketplace (32-38).

Direct advertising and sponsorships were introduced later (ch. 4), including broadcasting of commercials (ch. 5) and exclusive agreements governing the sale of junk food (ch. 6). Gidney concludes by exploring the now ubiquitous fundraisers that generate modest income for schools while providing significant brand exposure for participating companies (ch. 7). This

steady evolution of corporate influence was caused by—and reinforced—“a cultural context generally supportive of business involvement in schools” (85).

Without condemning corporatization outright or denying its benefits, Gidney asserts that companies leverage their involvement in schools, under the banner of philanthropy or “corporate social responsibility,” to cultivate loyalty and convince the public that their aims are altruistic (135). The reality, however, is that decisions are based on companies’ ability to forecast a positive return on their investment of money, resources, and employees’ time. If this trend remains unchecked, Gidney claims, it is a harbinger of future societal challenges: When companies are allowed to influence impressionable young minds, they promote a culture oriented toward consumption that “counters schools’ emphases on intellectual creativity, personal development, and individual well-being” (156). Furthermore, monetary and resource support from corporations diverts attention from problems such as inadequate funding and exacerbates inequities in poorer districts that are less attractive targets for companies.

Gidney analyzes historical records, including, but not limited to, newspapers, magazines, annual reports, school board publications, and meeting minutes. This large scope of sources allows her to make highly nuanced assessments of the competing perspectives that accompanied disputes over allowing corporations into schools. She also draws on a breadth of secondary historical, sociological, and psychological scholarship to contextualize her primary source analysis. For example, Gidney explores how granting corporations access to children serves as a tacit endorsement of

specific corporate brands, and of consumerism in general. She supports this claim by referencing social psychological research on the detrimental impacts of consumer culture and children’s inability to distinguish advertising from factual claims (4, 156). Gidney delineates many examples and makes liberal use of images, methodically building her argument that because “public and private interests are not the same” (155), corporations have no place in public schools.

Missing from Gidney’s analysis is an acknowledgement of the growing movement of enterprises that prioritizes social impact over profit. These businesses are associated with a range of third-party verification programs and build genuine altruism into their corporate DNA. There exist, for example, more than 3,000 certified “B Corporations” globally, which “are legally required to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment.” [*bcorporation.net*, accessed 25 March 2020.] One can presumably have considerably greater trust in the motives of enterprises that prioritize positive social impact.

Gidney does, however, provide evidence that grassroots resistance to corporate incursion has altered dynamics and made it imperative that *all* corporations at least pay lip-service to social responsibility. Questionable intentions notwithstanding, most companies now incorporate some community-building and charitable initiatives into their strategies. While Gidney simplifies the corporate landscape to some degree, she still makes a compelling argument that *traditional* corporations will continue to exploit schools that are publicly under-resourced.

Many scholars over several decades

have chronicled the issues associated with corporate influence on Canadian education, largely conducting sociological assessments. Gidney provides much-needed historical perspective on corporatization's gradual intensification, and *Captive Audience* thus represents an important addition to this scholarly debate. In fact, given the book's merits, some readers might have wished to see the discussion extended beyond K-12 public education to address impacts on private schools, online learning, and home schooling.

With detailed endnotes and an extensive index, historians, sociologists, and scholars of education will appreciate the book's broad scope and exhaustive research. Gidney achieves this rigour without resorting to dry, turgid language, so the book remains accessible to parents, teachers, and others who are wary about

the intrusion of corporations into schools.

At times disheartening, but always balanced and enlightening, Gidney's treatment of this sensitive subject provides a comprehensive overview of corporations' progressive invasion of public school systems. Scholars and concerned citizens alike will gain a clear understanding of corporatization's rapid advance, and a deeper appreciation of the ways sanctioning corporate involvement in schools fosters loyalty to brands and legitimizes a consumption-oriented culture. Readers will be in a better position to ask penetrating questions about society's trajectory: *Am I willing to allow children to be a "captive audience" for self-interested, profit-driven corporations?*

Ryan D. Jacobs
PhD Student, Department of History,
University of Waterloo

The Memoirs of Alexander Brodie

Edited and annotated by John Steckley

Oakville, ON: Rock's Mills Press, 2019. xi + 161 pages. \$24.95 paperback.
ISBN-13 978-1-77244-173-4 (<https://www.rocksmillspress.com/brodie.html>)

These memoirs chronicle the experiences of Alexander Brodie and his family, Scottish immigrants who, in 1835, left behind unfavourable economic circumstances in Aberdeenshire and settled on a farm in York County, Upper Canada named Craigieburn. Born in 1826, Brodie composed the memoirs toward the end of his long life (he died 1916), and bequeathed them to a niece in hopes of preserving for posterity a first-hand account of their family's transatlantic journey, and of assuring status-conscience descendants

that they were not the progeny of "beggars or malefactors" (ix). John Steckley, who has edited and annotated the work, is Brodie's great-great-great nephew.

The Memoirs of Alexander Brodie contain valuable information on an array of topics. Indeed, if one were to invoke a food-related metaphor in an attempt to capture the sheer variety of stimulating material on offer in this book, a smorgasbord would be an apt candidate. Among many other issues, Brodie's engagement with politics and Indigenous-settler relations at-