

Facebook founder's gift to Newark schools: The return of the aristocratic principle

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The donation of \$100 million by Facebook cofounder Mark Zuckerberg to the Newark school system is a small episode that reveals something fundamental about American society.

The move, lauded uncritically by the American media, embodies and further enshrines the principle that has come to prevail in the US in recent years: if the population is to have access to education, culture and technology, indispensable for life in a modern society, it will be at the whim of the very rich. Any conception of social rights residing inalienably in the people is rejected by the ruling elite and its political and media apologists.

This is, in effect, the return of the aristocratic principle. Under the old regime, the population was essentially at the mercy of the great ones in society, who bestowed—or did not bestow—favours and gifts as they saw fit.

The democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries were influenced by the notion of the social contract—that a society arises out of the desire of people to live together for their mutual benefit. The government and its officials, according to the ideologists of the bourgeois revolution, were delegated to act as the representatives of society as a whole, with the people retaining the ultimate sovereignty.

In the 19th century in the US, liberal and socialist-influenced reformers took up the battle for public education as a social right, seeing it, in part, as a defense of the republican form of government against European monarchies and nobilities. The emergence of the working class and its struggles gave the fight for universal education a new significance.

All of that is now being reversed. The availability of decent public schools, public libraries, orchestras and other cultural and educational institutions is more and more reduced to the level of a privilege, which the financial elite can provide or not, as it chooses. The wealthy few buy and sell, set up or close down, these socially vital services according to their financial health and individual mindset.

The population is encouraged by the media and the political system to look on these billionaire benefactors as

heroes, as their superiors in every fashion, to whom deference should and must be shown.

The notion that the government has a responsibility to educate children, once held up as a sign of America's democratic greatness, is now brushed aside in practice by both big business parties and the corporate elite. The aristocracy that rules America today, and we use the term advisedly, treats the population as a collection of peons who should consider themselves lucky if a benevolent billionaire happens to glance kindly on them.

And so we get the large sums being handed out by Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, and now Facebook's Zuckerberg, a billionaire at 26 and the 35th richest person in America, according to *Forbes* magazine's new list. Whether the donations soothe the consciences of these gentlemen or not, the money will have no measurable impact on America's crumbling infrastructure. The latter requires the application of a massive, coordinated social effort, involving the expenditure of trillions of dollars, which will be possible only as the result of radical wealth redistribution and changes in social policy.

The rich giving away a share of their ill-gotten gains has an infamous and odorous history. Various Robber Barons contributed considerable sums to good works, depending on their piety and concerns about the afterlife. John D. Rockefeller, who had miners and their families shot down in Colorado, handed out dimes to the poor. Frederick Engels long ago denounced the wealthy, "self-complacent" philanthropists who "give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!"

Charity is degrading to those who receive it and those who bestow it. It inevitably demands that the oppressed feel gratitude toward their oppressors, and generally encourages slavishness. Socialism, on the other hand, urges a relentless struggle against existing social ills and works toward eliminating the poverty and misery that are the preconditions for charity. The philanthropists' "remedies," as Oscar Wilde pointed out, "do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease."

There are many especially unsavory aspects to Zuckerberg's gift to Newark's schools. It is widely speculated in the media that the September 24 announcement of the donation—on the Oprah Winfrey Show, no less!—was timed to counteract the negative portrayal of the Facebook executive in the upcoming film, *The Social Network*. The book on which the movie is based, *The Accidental Billionaires*, depicts Zuckerberg as “a hard-hearted genius with a fetish for Asian women who is not above stealing ideas and turning on his friends in his quest to create the dominant social network.” (*Fortune*)

“Accidental” seems a fairly appropriate adjective. Social networking, in the end, is the more or less inevitable result of dramatic developments in technology and communications. It is doubtful whether Zuckerberg is a genius, although he may very well be talented and inventive. That an individual or individuals, geniuses or not, should pocket billions from such an innovation, which will no doubt be superseded before too long by other, more advanced and flexible forms of communication, is a social obscenity that needs to be added to a long list in contemporary America.

When asked by journalist Edward R. Murrow in 1955 as to the owner of the patent on his polio vaccine, Dr. Jonas Salk, who saved masses of people from death and suffering, replied, “Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?” Now, we have people of far less stature, such as Zuckerberg, coining fortunes out of the latest twist and turn on the technological highway. One can only feel repugnance.

Added to that is the specific character and aims of the Newark gift. The New Jersey city is one of the poorest and most violent in the US, whose population has been preyed upon for decades by corrupt, thieving politicians. Its current mayor, a Democrat, Cory Booker, is a “pro-business” reactionary, beloved by rightwing think tanks and foundations.

Booker, speaking before the ultra-right Manhattan Institute, for example, denounced the “old paradigm” of “big city mayors...capturing big entitlements from the state and federal government,” a practice which he criticized as “about distributing wealth.”

Booker greeted Zuckerberg's gift, which the two had apparently been discussing for some months, by saying: “We're grateful that this young, innovative entrepreneur is so dedicated to helping create the next generation of successful entrepreneurs and leaders... We know that investing in educational excellence today will create the foundation for Newark's prosperity and competitiveness in the decades ahead.”

The gift of \$100 million in Facebook stock is specifically attached to plans to put Newark's crisis-ridden school

system, which has been under state control since 1995, back under the city's control and to institute “education reform” in a sweeping fashion. As the *Newark Star-Ledger* bluntly expressed it, Booker, with the support of Governor Chris Christie, a Republican, “will embark on an ambitious series of changes long opposed by teachers unions. Those changes will include an expansion of charter schools, new achievement standards and methods for judging which schools and teachers are effective, the sources said.” The latter methods include merit pay and other retrograde measures.

Derrell Bradford, also a Democrat, and executive director of Excellent Education for Everyone, an outfit that supports charter schools and vouchers for private schools, i.e., the destruction of public education, told the *Christian Science Monitor* that Booker, Christie and Zuckerberg were on the “right side of the ‘culture war’ of education reform—people ‘who believe in competition’ and achieving measured goals. The other side, he says, is ‘a baby boomer, excuse-laden culture...that says input is all that matters and results are irrelevant.’”

In reality, the Zuckerberg gift is not a harmless “do-good” exercise, but promises to inflict considerable social damage.

This act of social degradation unfolding in Newark is hardly an isolated case. The *New York Times* reported Sunday on the increasing trend of privatized libraries in the US, placing decisions about the availability of books and the fate of employees in the hands of for-profit vultures. “A private company [Library Systems & Services],” writes the *Times*, “has taken over public libraries in ailing cities in California, Oregon, Tennessee and Texas, growing into the country's fifth-largest library system.”

Big business is inevitably dirty business, as we pointed out in 2006, in a comment on Warren Buffett's philanthropy. On the same day as Zuckerberg announced his largesse on the Oprah Winfrey program, the US Justice Department filed an antitrust complaint against a group of America's “leading innovators,” including Apple, Adobe Systems, Google, Intel, Intuit and Pixar, alleging that the latter conspired to keep salaries down among their employees by promising not to offer jobs to each other's staff. This was “standard operating procedure,” a human resources consultant in the area told the *San Jose Mercury News*.



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