

Joel Bakan: *Childhood Under Siege. How Big Business Callously Targets Children*, Free Press, US: Simon and Schuster; UK: The Bodley Head, Random House, 2011

I wrote two short pieces –750 words were allowed for each – for newspapers. One was a reflection on Hannah Arendt’s concept “the banality of evil” for a series that The Guardian of London is doing on “Big Ideas.”¹ The installment of the series on “the banality of evil” was meant to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, about which Arendt had written her controversial “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on The Banality of Evil” (1963). The second piece was a book review for Toronto’s main newspaper, The Globe & Mail,² of a book entitled “Childhood Under Siege: How Big Business Callously Targets Children,” which appeared last week from Penguin/Canada.³ The author is Joel Bakan, a law professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who is well-known in Canada and in the U.S. for a best-selling earlier book, *The Corporation* (2004), on the basis of which he and a big production team made a terrific award-winning documentary, also called *The Corporation*. This co-incidence of writing tasks made me think from two different directions about the topic Arendt once called “personal responsibility under dictatorship,” and in this blog I would like to share those thoughts with you –and the two texts as well.

Here is what I wrote about Bakan’s book:

If a group of legislators or policy-makers concerned to protect children and childhood from being targeted by corporations were looking for a briefing book, a catalogue of abuses, Joel Bakan’s “Childhood Under Siege” would certainly be the right choice. It would inform them about the key American fronts of an undeclared corporate anti-child war. But it would not help them analyze the war’s cause, track its history, or strategize their fight.

Devoting a chapter to each, Joel Bakan takes up eight areas where corporations and their advertising departments are pushing developmentally inappropriate and unhealthy goods on kids and lobbying for anti-child policies. He explores, first, the world of video games and online “entertainments”, offering appalling examples of calculated manipulations of children’s love of excitement and their needs for company. Then on to corporations of various sorts purveying a “curriculum” to children. Precociously, they learn about sex from explicit sexual scenes and pornography that are available without check. Sexy clothes and gadgets can be bought by anyone; sexy chat and sexting are free. Violence and mayhem are ubiquitous. “Ninety percent of [U.S.] children between the ages of four and

1 Guardian.co.uk, Aug.19, 2011

2 The Globe & Mail, Aug. 26, 2011

3 Joel Bakan: *Childhood Under Siege: How Big Business Callously Targets Children*, Canada (Penguin), US (Free Press, Simon and Schuster) and UK (The Bodley Head, Random House) 2011

six are on-screen for at least two hours a day...Tweens and teens spend, on average, eight hours a day ... consuming media.”

Big Pharma has found in children the new frontier for selling psychotropics. Doctors and psychiatrists are manipulated into prescribing to children, whose brains are still developing, all kinds of meds, including anti-psychotics. Big Pharma’s marketing techniques are similar to those of food-producing corporations that market junk food, addicting children to regimes of sugar and caffeine, contributing to zooming rates of childhood obesity and diabetes and neurological disorders.

These corporations are just as oblivious to the harm they are doing to children’s health as the environmental polluters responsible for making asthma the leading cause of child hospitalizations and school absences, as one in ten U.S. children suffer from it. Childhood cancers are on the rise, and the main culprits are environmental toxins. Corporations make sure that toxicity standards are made from adult data, while children are vulnerable to toxins at much lower levels.

Child labor is slowly being reinstated, particularly in agriculture. Corporations are taking over the field of public education, which was supposed to have become universal with the institution of anti-child labor laws in the early 20th century. Charter schools are subsidized with tax payers’ money for their profit-making enterprises.

In a corporation, which is a “person” in U.S. legal terms, the bottom line rules absolutely. Making the maximum for shareholders is a corporation’s legal *raison d’être*, explains Bakan, a professor of law in Vancouver. So by its very nature, a corporation will not serve the people or “the commons” that belongs to everyone. This was the theme of Bakan’s 20...best-selling book “The Corporation” and of a very fine documentary that was made from it. “Children Under Siege” is an off-shoot of a long section in that book on “the nag factor”—that is, on how corporations set children at odds with their parents, who become powerless as their children are turned into consumers.

Because it focuses on children, the current book is more limited than “The Corporation” was by the way Bakan thinks and by the ‘child saver’ role he wants to play. He is given to utterly simplistic historical and causal statements: The targeting of children can be dated precisely to 1980, he announces, when neoliberalism triumphed and governments stopped regulating corporations. With that, the entire history of child abuse and neglect disappears from view. What is left is a Manichean face-off between Bad Corporations and Good Parents, who have only good intentions toward their children. Swallowed up in the bad “person” of the corporation, CEOs and managers are not persons, and are incapable of personal responsibility. But as parents those same people will be full of love and caring — and just as helpless in the face of their corporation’s power as any other Good Parent. All parents, he implies, are like the Bakans, who are described in embarrassingly schmaltzy terms in the Acknowledgements. They would never do any harm!

In the Good Parents/Bad Corporations fantasy Bakan operates with, the Good are rendered powerless by the Bad, and the Bad is unstoppable because it is not made up of any real people who have real choices and real responsibility toward children and toward the future children represent. And there are no other adults: no citizens, no legislators, no children’s rights advocates. No political process. In Bakan’s world, no group of legislators

or policy makers would ever gather to read *Childhood Under Siege* and use it to try to protect children from the anti-child practices it investigates so well.

In *The Corporation*, Bakan's activist message was: a corporation is a legal entity constituted by a government for a limited period of time; that means a government can dissolve a corporation, particularly if it is behaving destructively, harming the people who are not its shareholders and devastating "the commons." As the very least, governments can regulate corporations, as they once, to a certain extent, did. So Bakan was calling upon citizens to get their elected representatives to protect them from corporations. He could, therefore, leave unasked the question: but what about the people inside the corporation, the leaders and the shareholders, have they no insider responsibility? Are they just functionaries? What sense does it make to say "the corporation did this or that harmful thing," as though a corporation really were a person making a decision, doing harm.

The personal responsibility question left unasked in "The Corporation" is even more muted in "Childhood Under Siege: How Corporations Callously Target Children". The primary audience for this book seems to be parents, in their role as parents, not in their role as citizens who might act politically against corporations that are turning children into consumers or in their role as insiders in corporations. Without meaning to, I am sure, Bakan is sending parents, whose goodness and good-will he assumes, the message that they have been rendered powerless as parents by the corporations. The vicious and sexually debased video games your child is viewing on his electronic device are available to him no matter what you might try to do to block his access. The food regime you institute at home is no protection against the junk food available everywhere – or the junk added to what you think is good, nutritious food. Environmental toxins are in and around you; you are trapped. Corporate advertising has gotten to your kids and turned them against you, making them into kids who nag you until you give in and buy whatever it is they have been convinced to crave. Family unity has been undermined. This is not a call to action.

The great weakness of Bakan's book, which is very valuable as documentation, is that he is confused about personal responsibility – he does not know how to think about it or how to write about it. He is right that corporations, as legal entities, encourage people to give up, as it were, their personhood and subsume themselves in the "person" of the corporation, which –metaphorically, but also in actual legal terms—is supposed to make decisions that maximize shareholder profits. So corporate leaders are encouraged not to consider the impact of their decisions on their customers, or on the environment from which they draw their materials and into which they put their waste products, or on their workers. They are rewarded for considering only the bottom line and for displaying loyalty to the corporate purposes; and, in doing so, they are law-of-the-corporation abiding. But this does not mean that they are not personally responsible; it just means they have chosen not to be personally responsible.

An authoritarian regime headed in the direction of being a totalitarian regime operates like a corporation: it rewards people who abide by its laws, even as those laws morph into laws which make harm and then murder legal and normal and which eventually sanction state-sponsored massacres, administrative massacres (which we now call crimes against

humanity). The bottom line is loyalty to the regime and its interests. But anyone who will not be such a faithful servant has other options: whistle-blowing, sabotage, becoming a resister and – if possible – helping organize a resistance. What people suffer to say no is often dreadful, but they have chosen that form of suffering rather than the suffering of going along in crimes against humanity.

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