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The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling.
Jal Mehta. Reviewed by Eva Gold.

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souls for Christ—bringing the “good news” to more people. Surely such recruitment would assist in winning divine approval and might also be considered an “outward sign.”

So one answer to why evangelistic Christians pursue values imperialism is for them to assuage the uncertainty of predestination by working hard for His son, in the hope that doing so might move the needle to the salvation goal line. Anxious uncertainty is a powerful motivator. A similar dynamic might be a factor in other aggressive value systems.

In sum, the book reads well and would be useful for courses in the sociology of religion and courses in social and public policy especially.

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Jal Mehta, *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*, Oxford University Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

Jal Mehta challenges our tendency to believe that every education reform effort is “new,” and therefore holds fresh promise for improving student performance. In *The Allure of Order*, Mehta provides a retrospective of the standards reform movement, showing that its roots hail back to the Progressive Reform era. He traces forward from this period, demonstrating how publication of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983 gave fresh legitimacy to the standards movement that has lasted through today. Although the value of standards as a primary driver of educational improvement has generated a plethora of literature, Mehta’s search for why this reform has persisted, despite frustration with student achievement gains, adds depth to an ongoing and urgent policy discussion about strategies to improve student performance.

Mehta reminds us that the repeated cycles of school rationalization that define our education reform path were the result of a series of decisions by “policy entrepreneurs” able to invoke a sense of crisis to install their reform notions. The Progressive Era was characterized by two trends: the Deweyan path that foregrounded a rich liberal arts education, dependent on a high quality of teacher-student interaction; and a rationalist path, where top-down decision-making through a

professionalized education management class was imposed on the teaching profession. The latter gained traction as education outcomes were increasingly defined around economic goals. With *A Nation At Risk* explicitly tying education outcomes to U.S. competitiveness in the global market, policymakers—Republicans and Democrats alike—endorsed the “scientific management” approach as the reform pathway.

Mehta identifies three interrelated phenomena that explain the susceptibility of our education system to the imposition of a standards-based accountability system. First, he points to the fixation we have with “scientific” solutions to social problems, in a vain search for painless, low-cost fixes to social inequities. Second, he discusses how “rational” technocratic solutions, such as the imposition of standards and accountability, address at the back end a quest to identify highly qualified teachers, without taking account of the pay, preparation and continuing learning support needed at the front end to build a strong teacher corps. And last, the K-12 teaching profession, for many years one of a few career options for women, has been a low-status field unable to defend itself. Mehta suggests the profession is further hobbled by the teachers unions, which have held tight to protecting teachers’ salaries and working conditions without putting much weight behind ideas that could develop the profession and improve teaching and learning.

Mehta lays out principles for countering the current weaknesses of the education system. He suggests that teachers, now at the bottom of the bureaucratic chain, should be at the core of any improvement strategy. Schools should be the focal unit of change, and districts should be supporting actors, not leading ones. He suggests that the most promising alternative system is the “portfolio district,” a public-private hybrid model now about a dozen years in the making. This system is modeled on a stock portfolio; it is one in which a district consists of diverse district-managed and charter schools from which families can choose. And like with a non-productive stock, if families do not choose the school or if the school does not demonstrate strong student performance, then it is shed from the portfolio and another school opened to replace it. Largely it is in this plurality of types of schools, each with autonomy to select teachers, develop curriculum and manage its budget, that Mehta sees the possibility for innovation, and a glimmer of hope.

Mehta glosses over, however, the mounting questions about and evidence of the limitations of the portfolio district model. Those who advocate for portfolio districts often are the same as those who believe that standardized testing represents bottom line accountability—to measure student outcomes and teacher “effectiveness”—a reform approach Mehta has thoroughly debunked. In addition, knotty equity problems abound when some schools can “fundraise” or receive private sector funding; when “choice” results in concentrations of high needs students in a few, usually district-managed, schools; when school closings are part of a pattern of institutional abandonment of low-income neighborhoods; when experienced, diverse high quality teachers are not distributed fairly across schools; when there are indiscriminate attacks on unions; and when decimated urban districts lack the staff and know-how to manage their charter sector, to create a market of high quality schools to replace closing schools, to monitor complex contracts, and so forth. While I laud the idea that it is important to not only analyze problems but to also suggest solutions, to hold up the portfolio district as having so much promise without at least a hint of some of the troubling issues this model raises concludes Mehta’s book with a policy suggestion far less rigorously conceived than the analysis that preceded it.

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