

Book Review: Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money into Private Profit

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*FIELD OF SCHEMES: HOW THE GREAT STADIUM SWINDLE
TURNS PUBLIC MONEY INTO PRIVATE PROFIT*

Joanna Cagan, and Neil deMause

[Monroe ME: Common Courage Press 1998]

xi / 226 pages

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Field of Schemes presents an overview of the recent phenomenon of major American cities being “held hostage” by professional sports organizations in their demand for newer, and larger venues. The acceleration of new sports facilities at taxpayer cost is analyzed within a climate of “deceptive politicians, taxpayer swindles, media slants, the power of big money, and most of all, a political system that serves the rich and powerful at the expense of the average fan, the average taxpayer, the average citizen” (p. ix-x). In short, the authors contend that states and municipalities purport to be public servants—with the interest of the average taxpayer in mind—but in reality opt to subsidize the corporate ventures of team owners at the expense of taxpayers.

Cagan and deMause, journalists by profession, assert their argument of public swindle in a user-friendly manner. Their style is not unlike that found in other media vehicles that report and update the trend of new facility construction and team movement. However, Cagan and deMause do not share the opinions that are typically cited elsewhere. Their research, based largely upon interviews with citizen action groups and the general public, led them to conclude that, contrary to popular myths espoused by the media, there did not exist a public of “unthinking fans who demanded their elected officials keep teams in town at any cost” (p. ix), but rather “hundreds of citizen activists who had been fighting city by city for years to stop public money from going to private profit” (p. ix).

In tracing the roots of this public deception, Chapter 1 tells the comparable stories in two cities: Baltimore and Cleveland. The social, political, and economic cultures of these cities are detailed as significant in understanding how team owners attempt to manipulate city officials to their favor. Perhaps the most integral aftermath of the Baltimore and Cleveland examples was the precedent they set: the threats to leave, and the subsequent follow through of those threats, upped the ante for other teams and other cities. Because of the Baltimore and Cleveland experience, cities were forced to believe a team when it threatened to move.

Having set the framework for the willingness of teams to leave a city when their demands are not met, Chapter 2 explains the financial work-

ings of the sports industry. Suite deals, naming rights, and personal seat licenses are discussed, and revealed as hidden subsidies. This sets up what the authors term the “anatomy of a swindle” (p. 60). The economic underpinnings of the “swindle” are essential, and begin with the accounting practices in professional sports. Under this scheme, “[e]ven as revenues soar to record levels, team owners invariably insist that they are losing money hand over fist” (p. 44).

Chapter 4 details “The Art of the Steal” as comprised of seven steps used by team owners to secure new facilities at public expense. First, team owners “alleg[e] that [their] old stadium is obsolete, insufficient to cater to the demands of modern fans, or [is] even on the verge of physical collapse” (p. 65). Second, a threat to move the team is made. Third, if the public is unswayed by the contentions in steps one or two, the owner appeals to “fairness: The team simply can’t be competitive in the existing stadium” (p. 74). As Cagan and deMause point out, there is never a discussion about exactly what “competitive” means. Fourth, if the team owner does not have a new stadium deal at this point, teams of consultants are hired to generate volumes of reports that delineate the positive economic impact on the community if a new stadium is built. Fifth, because many cities require legislative referenda to vote on such deals, and such efforts can be inordinately time consuming, owners will often “declare a crisis: Proclaim that the window of opportunity on a new stadium will only remain open for so long, leaving unstated what disaster will befall the city if the window should be allowed to slam shut” (p. 78). Sixth, once the agreement for a stadium is on the drawing board, the authors suggest that the team still retains substantial leverage in re-negotiations that may occur (in the case of cost overruns, etc.). Thus, teams are allowed to keep “moving the goalposts” (p. 79) in an effort to elicit better terms and conditions for themselves. Finally, step seven is a review of the previous six steps. This step is present following the case of San Francisco, a city that underwent four attempts to secure public funding for a stadium before finally achieving a substantial subsidy on the fifth try.

Chapters 5 through 9 focus on the experiences in specific cities including Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, Minneapolis and San Francisco. Cagan and deMause are especially interested in community activist groups and neighborhood coalitions that started “grass roots” efforts to deter the use of public monies to support stadium building. The tone of these efforts appears to be dissatisfaction with public money being spent on private construction projects instead of social services and education.

At this point, the authors have painted a somewhat depressing picture. Sports fans, who are synonymously taxpayers, obviously have a loyalty to teams and to players, but at the same time maintain similar sentiments toward families, churches, schools, and other social institutions. Thus how is the average concerned fan to deal with these conflicting interests? Chapter 10 addresses this issue by suggesting that federal legislative action, and public ownership of teams (beyond a mere symbolic gesture), may eliminate, or at least control the spiraling costs of stadiums that are being picked up by the taxpayers.

In the Afterward, Cagan and deMause write that “[t]he effective blackmail that professional teams wield over cities is not good, it is not correct, and it is not eternal. It is the consequence of a particular state of affairs in which public agencies have become beholden to private power. It can be changed, and it’s worth changing” (p. 200). They conclude that while teams seem to keep “winning the argument,” (p. 198) the public is becoming increasingly savvy to the political threats and pressures being levied against them. This “changes the terms of the debate” (p. 198), and will hopefully contribute to better disclosure of information, and more informed decision making.

In addition to providing a practical exposition of the phenomenon of team movement and stadium deals, this book also describes the urban struggle generally. In that sense, it is as valuable to urban and city planners as it is to sports enthusiasts.

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