



BOOK REVIEW

No Contest — The case against competition
New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1992

By Kohn, Alfie

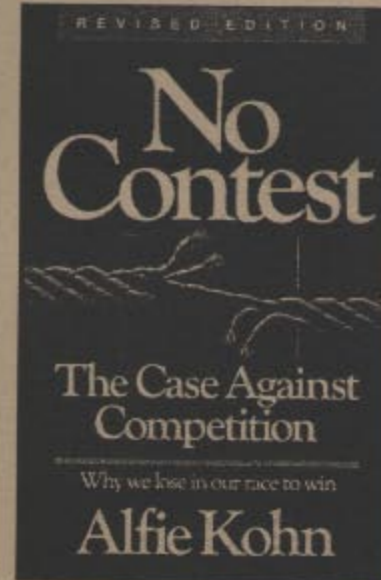
Reviewed by Matthew C. Clarke

Kohn's thesis in *No Contest* is that competition is bad, inherently and unredeemably bad. The book calls into question our normally unquestioned support for competition, not just in sport but in education, business and in the metaphors of human interaction in which we are immersed. I have always been suspicious of competition and so was naturally drawn to such a book. I have never seen competition criticised as thoroughly as it is here, and imagine that anyone who values co-operation and yearns for community is likely to become a fan.

While many people are critical of some of the detrimental effects of excessive competition, Kohn takes the extreme position that competition in all its forms is "inherently undesirable" and that there can be no such thing as "healthy competition." His critique draws on a wealth of research which, to Kohn at least, indicate that the empirical evidence is stacked against competition, highlighting his claim that the case for competition relies not on evidence, but on rhetorical gambits, conceptual imprecision, misrepresentation and misinformation.

Kohn first identifies four assumptions which underlie the acceptance of competition — that competition is unavoidably part of human nature, that competition increases productivity by motivating us to do our best, that all the joys of play hinge on competition, and that competition builds self-confidence and other laudable character traits. Then he systematically refutes each one.

Following this rebuttal of the case for competition, Kohn examines the inter-



personal consequences of competition, the inevitability of cheating and other "abuses" of competition, and the futility of that part of the women's movement which seeks to equal men in their competitiveness. The 1992 edition adds a chapter on co-operative learning strategies and an afterword commenting on the reception of the 1986 first edition.

Kohn does not provide a blueprint for a new society in *No Contest*, but does offer suggestions about how to promote change. For instance, even when caught within competitive situations, we can reduce our personal competitiveness by realising that self-esteem need not be contingent on winning. When playing a competitive game, don't keep score. Even if it's obvious who wins, don't award prizes. Become genuinely unconcerned with the results of our children's competitive encounters. However, changing personal attitudes and behaviour is not enough. Kohn accepts that "making our society less competitive

ultimately depends on reducing structural competition" by dismantling the arrangements which set us against one another and replacing them with co-operative ones. Various writers have implemented such thinking in specific fields, from co-operative games and co-operative learning to co-operative politics.

While many may affirm the ideal of a co-operative society, they will also raise numerous practical questions. Can the ideal be achieved by simply promoting co-operation? Can the sort of actions Kohn suggests alter an attitude that is so deeply ingrained in our social structures and expectations? Are the problems caused by competition a sufficiently severe threat, or the benefits of co-operation a sufficiently attractive lure to drive social change?

No Contest falls short of a definitive action-plan, but that is no real criticism since its explicit aim is just the first step of disrobing the Emperor of Competition. The details of the next steps towards social change still need to be woven by those of us who agree with Kohn's conviction that the current situation needs radical reformation.

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