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Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms, by Diane Ravitch. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, 560 pp., $30.00 (Cloth).

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I recently met with a group of young people who had joined Teach for America upon graduating from college. They described the physical and social conditions they found when they left their, for the most part, prestigious colleges and institutions to come to the Bronx. Most of the young teachers had come from suburban districts that, if not affluent, were at least middle class. They said they felt as if they had gone to another country. One student said there were no overhead projectors in classrooms in her school. Another said that her school, recently reopened as a magnet school for the arts, had inadequate music and drama facilities. A young woman told us that her first-grade students received no materials for their literacy program until the middle of December.

As an assignment in a course on family, school, and community relationships, the students had worked in teams to create grant proposals. Their projects reflected the needs they had identified among their students and their families. One group sought funds for after-school recreation programs to fill the lack of safe neighborhood playgrounds or parks. Another group had written a grant to fund a Translator Center in an elementary school in which half of the students were native Spanish speakers. The other two teams had created proposals for literacy programs to supplement their schools' efforts to teach students how to read and write. The Teach for America participants had done a fine job in their assignments. Disturbed by the low academic achievement among their students, they

had identified some of the structural impediments that prevented parents, faculty, and administrators from helping children learn.

In *Left Back*, Diane Ravitch agrees with those young teachers that many urban schools are no longer "centers for learning" and suggests that a study of "decisions and policies that were made long ago" will help us understand why (p. 14). At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the number of students in American public schools increased. This rise in enrollment resulted in discussions about what these young people should study. There was a fundamental disagreement between those who believed in a rigorous academic curriculum for all and those who thought only college-bound students needed such a course of study. Ravitch argues that those who believed in a "differentiated" curriculum were "based primarily in the schools of education, identified . . . with the new progressive education movement and dominated the education profession in its formative years" (p. 15). They believed that by providing different kinds of education for students, schools would better meet society's, as well as the students', needs. Ravitch claims that their policies created tracking, usually based on race and class, and that the distinctions they made were "not only profoundly undemocratic" but also "harmful, both to the children involved and to American society" (p. 15). The policies that were instituted in public schools as a result of the persuasiveness and influence of these educational theorists deprived many young people in the United States of the opportunity to study traditional subjects such as history, science, mathematics, literature, and foreign languages. As a result, "large numbers of children were pushed through the school system without benefit of a genuine education" (p. 16). Children from poor or immigrant families and children of color were the most negatively affected. They were rarely placed in college preparatory programs; instead, they found themselves in less rigorous vocational and general courses of study. The work of the Progressive educational professionals cost public schools a clear sense of their "primary responsibility for the development of young people's intelligence and character" (p. 17). In doing so, they were unfaithful to the original inspiration of the common school. In the resulting confusion, generations of Americans were deprived of the

opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills they needed to participate fully in self-government, become economically successful, and appreciate the beauty and power of the arts. The consequences for the country have also been harmful. We have jeopardized our way of life by allowing young people to remain ignorant of the principles and traditions on which it is based. We have ultimately been unfaithful to the wisdom that inspired the creation of a system of free public schools—we have failed to create the well-educated citizenry that our multicultural democracy requires.

Much research, notably that of Anyon (1981) and Oakes (1995), supports Ravitch's argument that educational stratification or tracking limits the futures of children of color and poor children. Ravitch provides us with a historical interpretation of the persons and ideology that set the system in motion. She rounds up the usual suspects among the educational Progressives—Edward Thorndike and the intelligence testing movement, G. Stanley Hall and the child-centered school movement, Harold Rugg and the social science movement, and David Snedden and the social efficiency movement. However, she also includes other less predictable educators in her dragnet. John Dewey and George Counts and the social reconstructionist Progressives also come in for Ravitch's criticism. Ravitch discusses each branch of Progressivism separately and assigns them varying degrees of responsibility for the creation of nonacademic courses of study. However, she concludes that all of them were, in a variety of ways, influenced by prejudices about the connection between a child's race, class, gender, and ethnicity and their academic potential. She argues that those biases ultimately were incorporated into Progressive educational ideology as a whole.

Many of us believe that there is much in Progressivism to admire. Some, including Theodore Sizer, Deborah Meier, and Howard Gardner, whom Ravitch cites admiringly, for example, think that their critique of lifeless educational methods were important contributions. Others, including Ravitch herself, agree with their assertion that schools can contribute to the creation of a more just social order. Therefore, her conclusion that Progressives were implicated in the creation of unjust social policies and practices

may be hard to accept. However, it is also difficult to refute. For example, Anderson (1988) and other historians of the African American educational experience have demonstrated that Progressive educators' support of industrial education was as often based on prejudice as on pragmatism. Rury (1991) and Powers (1992) have documented the consequences of gender bias on women's education. By calling these unfortunate aspects of Progressivism to our attention, Ravitch provides us with reason to evaluate all programs of differentiated curriculum with great care. Her caution is especially timely, for example, as the Department of Education has announced its intention to fund single-gender schools and classrooms in response to the "No Child Left Behind" Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002. Ravitch's critique of Progressivism's role in creating educational stratification points out that long before *Brown v. Board of Education* there was ample evidence that separate education was rarely, if ever, equal.

In highlighting past critics of educational Progressivism's project, she also performs a valuable service. William Torrey Harris, William Chandler Bagley, and Isaac Kandel are not educational theorists who are studied in teacher preparation programs as often as are Dewey and Counts. In bringing them to our attention, for example, Ravitch demonstrates that many who argue that all students should study the traditional Western canon do so because they believe that all students, regardless of race, class, or gender, should have access to all knowledge that is valuable. She positions herself among them. In doing so she demonstrates that those who take such a position do not believe that wisdom is the sole possession of the West. Instead, they want all students to have an academically rigorous curriculum that is intellectually honest. Such a course of study affords students the opportunity to study the intellectual traditions of many societies and to become conscious of the scientific, literary, political, economic, and artistic contributions of people from all around the world.

Ravitch makes a substantial contribution by providing a general readership with the opportunity to understand our current educational state through the study of our history. In doing so, she provides an interpretation of why past decisions about schools were

made and what the consequences of those decisions were. However, despite the persuasiveness of her argument and the convincing evidence she presents to support it, *Left Back* leaves out some aspects of the history of public school reforms.

Not surprisingly, I suppose, the questions I have about Ravitch's work go back to the stories and proposals I heard from the Teach for America volunteers. They illuminated the interconnectedness of economics, politics, and education, and raised the issue of the material and social conditions of schools in a way that Ravitch does not. We do not, for example, learn from Ravitch how the Progressives were able to push their agenda. Were there school board elections in which candidates who supported the flawed reforms were elected? Was there a match between their agenda and the interests of parents for their children? Did a differentiated curriculum reflect parents' perception of what type of education would best prepare their children for the world? Did economic realities affect that acceptance?

Ravitch suggests that some Progressive reforms were beneficial to students—especially the introduction of new pedagogical techniques that made a rich liberal arts curriculum accessible for students. She notes that this kind of education was most often found in private schools. Once again, the power of the Progressive educational elite is blamed for this development. However, she does not fully explore economic factors that may have also contributed to the acceptance of their ideas.[1] Was the education offered at the private schools more expensive to provide, perhaps? Did the low salaries of public school teachers affect their ability to obtain advanced degrees that might have better prepared them in pedagogical and content area knowledge? Did parents and school boards reject those ideas in favor of more traditional instructional modes?

Left Back also offers only limited statistical evidence about how widely and how completely Progressive ideas were implemented in classrooms across the country. That lack is understandable, given the limited data collected on the actual processes of teaching and learning. To her credit, Ravitch notes that lack and even suggests that, in many cases, teachers and school districts resisted the most extreme aspects of the reforms. In this respect she agrees with the

findings of Tyack and Cuban (1995) and with more recent work on the role of teacher decision making on the acceptance of any fad in educational reform. However, Ravitch sometimes fails to moderate her claims about the effect of the Progressives' ideas. She paints with a broad brush at times and fails to document her statements and this tendency is especially troublesome to those who would like to validate them. For example, when she writes, "In the 1920s and 1930s, the reformers never doubted that they—not parents, not local school boards, not teachers—should decide what should be taught in the nation's public schools, and to which group of children" (p. 162), the extremism of the claim is striking. The reader asks whether it is really "Never?" or whether, "left no evidence that they doubted" might make her claim more defensible. Other examples of such unqualified statements can be found throughout the text and seem to unnecessarily weaken an argument that might have been plausibly made without them. They leave the reader, even one sympathetic to her position, asking, "But how do we know?"[2]

Although it is extremely valuable in the ways I have already discussed, Ravitch's work leaves these questions unasked and, therefore, unanswered. Despite these missing pieces, however, *Left Back* is an important addition to our thinking about the effect of Progressivism on American education and to our consideration of reform proposals. It reminds us that, with the best of intentions, we may set into motion forces whose consequences run counter to our most cherished hopes.

NOTES

1. Ravitch does allude to this aspect of the success of Progressive reforms (p. 51), but the pressure from business leaders for "economy and efficiency in the schools" is not given adequate consideration in the passage or in the rest of the text.

2. Other examples include, "Despite local control, the American public school was remarkably similar across regions. Everywhere the goals were few and simple" (pp. 20-21); "There was a striking homogeneity of offerings, since teachers and parents had a broadly shared understanding about what children should learn in schools. Virtually all communities wanted their children to learn reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography and nature study in the common schools, and they wanted the high schools to teach Latin, a foreign language or two, mathematics, literature, grammar, the sciences, ancient history, English history, American history, drawing, music and practical courses such as bookkeeping and

woodworking" (p. 163); and "[Rugg] believed that public schools clung to subject matter and traditional methods only because they were controlled by conservative, business-dominated boards that did not represent public opinion" (p. 196).

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