

Book Review

Diane Ravitch

Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to American Public Schools

New York: Knopf, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Outside observers commenting on American domestic policy are at a tremendous disadvantage. Various domains of public policy, but especially the enormously important and expensive fields of health care and education, attract organizations and attitudes which it is difficult for outsiders to understand. The large role played by private sector institutions from Health Maintenance Organizations (which manage health care for millions) to giant publishing houses and associated information technology firms (which dominate the textbook industry and thereby public school curricula) are just two of the businesses that exert extraordinary control over areas that most advanced countries think are properly administered in the public domain.

Even (or especially) the language is different. Fringe elements in American politics and in the print and broadcast media make patently outrageous claims about, for example, President Obama's political views. Some, for instance, claim that the president is a "socialist," thus proving only that they have no idea what a socialist (democratic or revolutionary) is. What's more, bizarre claims including the questions of the president's birth place or religious affiliation are made with apparent impunity and with brazen disregard for the facts. Moreover, even the mainstream media feel compelled to take such matters seriously and to feature quasi-debates on them. After all, it makes for dramatic theatre, but it increasingly seems like theatre of the absurd.

Now that the USA seems to have tired of Middle Eastern military adventures for the time being, the issues about which Americans argue seem mainly to be domestic and the issue of health insurance has preoccupied the electorate for at least the past year. Education, however, is never far from the spotlight and may soon come forward as being at least as important and as highly contested. Diane Ravitch has been at the centre of the controversy over schools for decades.

Reign of Error is the best way to educate yourself about the takeover of our educational system by billionaires who, even if they are well-intentioned, do not understand what they are doing. – Paul Horton, History Teacher - Chicago.

Ms. Ravitch is an educational historian who has spent a great part of her professional life in and around government. She was Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, and appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board under President Clinton—a position she retained through the first administration of President George W. Bush.

Originally a supporter of the President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program, Ravitch became increasingly disillusioned with the direction American education was taking and took the path of apostasy. She has now become as one of the most competent, coherent and severe critics of what might best be described as neoliberal or, perhaps, corporate education.

The main arguments brought against the existing public school system are pressed by an impressive range of celebrities, politicians and manufacturers and merchants of educational technology. They include, of course, the likes of Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann and other extreme right-wing Republicans whose anti-intellectualism is worn not only on their sleeves but on every other part of their wardrobes. They also include elite philanthropists and opinion leaders such Oprah Winfrey and, of course, Bill and Melinda Gates. As well, they do not exclude alleged progressives associated with President Obama, not least his former Chief of Staff and current Mayor of Chicago, Rohm Emanuel and, of course, his "education czar," Arne Duncan who is a coveted speaker at government and professional meetings where technologically mediated education is the *innovation-du-jour*.

Public schools and teachers who work at them are the target of a well-funded, well-coordinated plan to privatize as many schools as possible. The leaders of this effort want parents to be consumers. They want students to be products. – Diane Ravitch

The basic pitch goes as follows:

1. American schools are failing because pupils are not being adequately trained to perform competently in an increasingly competitive global economy;
2. Standardized test scores, especially in science and mathematics, are reliable indicators of future global competitiveness;
3. American students are failing in comparison to both European and Asian students in the competition for high test scores;
4. Teaching and learning can best be enhanced by technologically enhanced learning and teachers whose excellence is demonstrated in high student scores;
5. Failure is attributable to teachers' unions which protect poor teachers and resist technological innovation;
6. Therefore, public funding for schools should be geared to student performance on standardized tests, with high performance being financially rewarded and poor performance resulting in decreased funding;
7. As well, parents who wish to do so should receive vouchers to all of them to offset the costs of tuition and other expenses and allow them to send their children to "charter schools" or well-established private schools.

Underlying this line of reasoning is the presence of major right-wing foundations, brain trusts and think tanks, individual billionaires, and financial institutions such as Wall Street hedge funds who see education as a massive untapped market which could make tremendous profits, ensure a steady stream of pre-tested managerial employees and guarantee the maintenance of the economic system as it is currently structured. Diane Ravitch counters that "No Child Left

Behind” President Barack H. Obama’s follow-up, the rebranded “Race to the Top” programs represent a false solution to an artificial problem.

The false solution has at least three defining elements.

Firstly, the education involved in teaching to the test and judging academic achievement on a narrow range of demonstrable competencies effectively jettisons any sort of knowledge that is not immediately connected to employment and composed of marketable skills. This leaves not only the arts and humanities adrift, but it also abandons any sort of cultural, social or personal understanding. It not only ignores aesthetic appreciation, but also civic competence. In fact, it does not even encourage critical understanding of science and technology or work and the economy. Moreover, when subjects such as psychology or sociology do appear, they are intended mainly to relate to the goals of Human Resources and Marketing departments. The corporate curriculum is dedicated to producing drones and not merely the ones that drop bombs on others. The neoliberal belief is that the all-powerful, all-knowing “market” best determines what is best for the individual and best for society (if, that is, *pace* Margaret Thatcher, society is deemed even to exist). The standards of excellence are therefore the result of commercial exchanges or what Marx elegantly called the “callous cash nexus.” That is to say, if there is no demand for geography or philosophy, then they should not appear on the curriculum. The customer is always in charge. Education is a commercialized commodity. Of course, whether the students or the potential employers are the *real* customers remains endlessly debatable.

Education is a moral and political project. It is moral because it enables us to distinguish right and wrong, and it is political in that it helps us promote what is good and impede what is evil.” – Henry A. Giroux

Secondly, the teaching methodology is increasingly controlled by technology. According to Ravitch, technologically mediated education isn’t all bad. Although she declines to display servility before the graven image of tablets and the transcendent twitterverse, she recognizes both the inevitability and the ingenious opportunities with which computerization has presented us. After all, even dedicated Luddites disseminate their anti-technology tomes on the Internet.

Diane Ravitch, however, remains convinced that education is *about something*, that it is defined by its content more than by its technique. We should be developing independent thinkers, not accidental thinkers for whom research, if it is not limited to Wikipedia, is determined by the order of the list of items that pop up on Google in response to the entry of “key words.”

Public schools, moreover, are instruments of democracy in ways that the consumer model of curricular commodities can never be. Education, as he never fails to tell us when given half a chance, is a “moral and political project.” It is moral because it enables us to distinguish right and wrong, and it is political in that it helps us promote what is good and impede what is evil.

These are processes that do not accompany the merry jingle of the cash register, for those who remember those devices from the age before online shopping.

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Finally, privatized, high-tech schools don't even deliver what they promise. At the K-12 level, they use public funds to advertise and take millions from the public school budget to build "customized, personalized education, but that," says Ravitch, "is just rhetoric." Private schools from the youngest ages to post-graduate, largely online universities suck money out of the public system (the University of Phoenix alone is securing \$2 billion annually from the US federal government) and yield poor results. According to Ravitch, "virtual schools" exhibit high dropout rates, low test scores and low graduation rates. What's more, many of the government-subsidized alternative schools are little more than cover institutions for some sort of fundamentalist religious indoctrination.

Particularly insidious is the entry of major corporate publishing into both educational content and student evaluation. She has a particular interest in student grading and points out that large textbook publishers have now become major producers of testing software. Replacing essay-type assignments with multiple-choice questions is no longer the preferred method of increasing paper (or is that paperless?) productivity. Machines can score essays as speedily as true/false answers. Of course, they cannot (yet) judge statements of fact; so, as Ravitch points out, a student can write that World War II started in 1839 and the machine won't object; likewise the electro-mechanical device has a "deaf ear" for imaginative use of language or clever ways of expressing an argument.

The objections that Ravitch makes to the heavy wave of privatized, technologized teaching and learning are valid, well-stated and (to me at least) all but irrefutable. They also highlight the degree to which the corporate agenda has triumphed in contemporary American education. Uncritical acceptance of technologically enhanced education has won the hearts and minds of Republicans and Democrats alike.

We all know that American public education is in crisis. Not the crisis that the pundits talk about. American public education is in crisis because it is under attack. – Diane Ravitch

Part of the reason is the ease with which Americans have come to believe not only that their educational systems are a mess, but also that the fault lies with lazy, incompetent teachers and the "union thugs" who allegedly control schools and, for some, are indoctrinating their students with subversive socialist propaganda about biological evolution, socialism and sex education.

Diane Ravitch is here to explain that the results of the public school system, even according to the limited criteria of standardized testing, are not as bad as people have been led to believe. What's more, the solutions to what problems do exist do not come from punishing poorly

performing schools and students by cutting their funds, but by increasing the money for education, especially in the inner cities.

Poor educational performance is the product of poverty. This elemental fact ought to be intuitively obvious to even the casual observer. It does not, however, resonate among American educational leaders and their corporate sponsors. Instead, parents are urged to remove their children from failing schools whenever possible and to take the taxpayers' dollars with them to build the profit margins of private institutions.

What especially distresses me is not the response that American business and government has made to the phony educational crisis. Reasonable people can reasonably disagree—even about as testy an issue and the corporate assault on the public sector. Rather, I am dismayed by the vicious personal attacks on Diane Ravitch and other progressives in the United States. For example, Kyle Smith reviewed *Reign of Error* in the right-wing tabloid, *The New York Post* and alleged that Ravitch fabricates data, ignores scientific evidence and takes bribes from teachers' unions. And, of course, Smith quotes President Obama's "education czar" Arne Duncan in support of his attack. But, that's the *Post*. More troubling is David Brooks in the much praised *New York Times*. He writes that Ravitch does nothing but "adopt the party-line view of the most change-averse elements of the teachers' unions" and that her ideas lead only "to lethargy and perpetual mediocrity."

When it comes to K through 12 education, we see a \$500 billion sector in the U.S. – Rupert Murdoch

Brooks and his less civil acolytes manage to ignore some evidence of their own. *Reign of Error* is not a thoughtless polemic or a mindless screed. It is a methodical and highly professional study of an education system in trouble. She amply documents each of her main points with citations from the scholarly literature and illustrates her arguments with helpful graphics. Her argument is not only convincing but singularly humane. Unlike her critics, she is demonstrably interested in children. She applauds the arts, to be sure, but she also makes the point that youngsters need to play and emphasizes the importance of physical exercise every day. She is firmly committed to the principles that a child deserves to be treated like a person and not "just another piece of data," to know that schools provide "something enriching, valuable and worthwhile" every day and to have a "well-qualified teacher ... who is not forced to teach from a script."

This eminently sensible set of ideals plainly gets on the nerves of the "reform" (i.e., corporate) movement. The Arne Duncan-Bill Gates-Rupert Murdoch axis of entrepreneurial education is out to get her. Rupert Murdoch? Oh yes, I forgot. He owns *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post*, Fox News and digital education provider, "Amplify." Given their resources and their political allies in and out of power, it will be something just short of a miracle if they do not succeed.

About the Reviewer

Howard A. Doughty teaches political economy at Seneca College in Toronto. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.