

## ESSAY REVIEW

### *Left Back*: punditry or history?

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. . . the problem with being a public intellectual is that, as time goes on, one may become more and more public and less and less intellectual . . . less reflective, less inclined to question one's own judgements, less likely to embed a conviction in its appropriate context with all the nuance intact. . . . A public intellectual is not a paid publicist, not a spinner, not in the pocket of a narrowly defined purpose. (*The Nation* 2001: 28)

As a history of progressive education in the US, Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* is a study in lost nuance. Beginning with an indiscriminate definition of progressive education, the author proceeds to set up straw men and false dichotomies in attacking this US movement. Ravitch leaves largely undefined the 'academic' ideal for the US school that she promotes as superior so that it cannot be meaningfully examined. Finally, she chooses to ignore how universalizing secondary education affected the challenge of designing curriculum for all its adolescent students rather than the one in 20 who attended the US high school in 1900. There is a 'narrowly defined purpose' at work in *Left Back*, and it is not commensurate with the goals of a public intellectual.

. . . there's no sense that there are truths and ideas to be pursued. There are only truths and ideas to be used and crafted and made into their most useful and appropriate form. Everyone is thought to be after something, everyone is thought to have some particular goal in mind, independent of the goal that he or she happens to articulate. (*The Nation* 2001: 29)

### **Defining progressive education**

Ravitch's self-stated and apparently non-ideological aim in *Left Back* is 'to trace the origins of the permanent debate in the US about school standards,

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The book reviewed here is DIANE RAVITCH, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 555 pp., US\$30.00 (hbk), ISBN 0-684-84417-6, US\$17.00 (pbk), ISBN 0-743-20326-7.

curricula, and methods' (p. 15). The *de facto* goals of *Left Back* appear, however, to be to diminish John Dewey as a contributor to the advancement of US education and to discredit the term progressive as used in the descriptor, 'progressive' education. The process of achieving these objectives begins with her definition of progressive education in the US. In brief, Ravitch ascribes 'four significant ideas' to the movement:

- . . . education might become a science . . . measured with precision—the basis of the mental testing movement;
- . . . the methods and ends of education could be derived from the innate needs and nature of the child—the basis of the child-centred movement;
- . . . the methods and ends of education could be determined by assessing the needs of society and then fitting children for their role in society—the basis of the social efficiency movement; and
- . . . the methods and ends of education could be changed in ways that would reform society—the basis of the social reconstruction movement. (p. 60)

We can compare Ravitch's mentor, the late Lawrence Cremin, who summarized the meaning of progressivism in US education in his classic, *The Transformation of the School* (1961: viii–ix), in this way:

- . . . broadening the programme and function of the school to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life;
- . . . applying in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from new scientific research in psychology and the social sciences;
- . . . tailoring instruction more and more to the different kinds and classes of children who were being brought within the purview of the school; and
- . . . the radical faith that culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences but in the pursuit of the arts as well.

The comparison of these two summaries sets the stage for understanding *Left Back*. The most dramatic difference between the descriptions is the prominence of the 'social efficiency' movement in Ravitch's analysis and its absence from that of Cremin. Ravitch gives lengthy attention to David Snedden as an admirer of Herbert Spencer and a leading exponent of the social efficiency strand of progressive education (pp. 81–82). John Franklin Bobbitt, an early curriculum scholar, is also identified with the implementation of 'efficiency' (p. 102). Both men, and a number of their peers, e.g. W. W. Charters, are set up as exemplars of progressive education by casting social efficiency as an element of this movement. In contrast, Cremin never alludes to Snedden or social efficiency in his history of progressive education. Ravitch sets up an easily criticized version of progressive education by lumping efficiency-minded Social Darwinists together with socially-minded progressives. The former take the social environment as a given, whereas the latter are committed to improving

society. However, most would contend that progressives such as Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead opposed Spencerian notions while actively adapting the evolutionary focus of Darwin to social reform in their own ways. To collapse the two perspectives is unjustified in the absence of convincing argument and evidence. Ravitch offers neither.

In a related divergence from Ravitch, Cremin considers the ‘scientism’ of the educational psychologist E. L. Thorndike, and the curriculum scholars Bobbitt and Charters, to be an indicator of progressive impulses in their early careers—a movement from which they deviated after World War I (Cremin 1961: 369). Of Bobbitt, Cremin writes ‘His results may well have sparkled with precision, but in the process he had given up the progressive quest for the better life through education’ (p. 200). Thus, Cremin appreciates the difficulty of defining ‘progressive education’ and speaks to this point. As a consequence, his treatment is careful and nuanced so as to maintain appropriate historical perspective and acuity.

If we contrast the treatment of the scientific strand of progressive education in the two histories, other difficulties arise. To Ravitch, Thorndike is the paramount example of a scientific progressive educator due to his experimental work in, particularly, transfer of training and intelligence testing. Cremin, on the other hand, struggles with the place of scientism in progressive education because ‘many of its proponents . . . ended as conservatives after World War I’ (p. 369). When asserting that Bobbitt ‘had given up the progressive quest for the better life through education’, Cremin cites him as follows: ‘The school is not an agency of social reform. Its responsibility is to help the growing individual continuously and consistently to hold to the type of living which is the best practical one for him’ (p. 200).

Again, Cremin, in his prudent way, appears to suggest that educators who should be called ‘progressive’ either demonstrated to some degree all of the four characteristics he lists or, at a minimum, did not repudiate any of them. Particularly vital to progressives is his citation of the social reformer Jane Addams in what he calls the ‘spiritual nub of progressive education’:

. . . the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class . . . unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having (p. ix).

Contrast the manner in which Ravitch introduces science to the list of progressive descriptors with that of Cremin. In *Left Back*, making education into a science is a progressive aspiration, while Cremin more modestly asserts that progressives sought to apply science in pedagogical situations. Dewey dealt with this discrimination as far back as *The Child and the Curriculum* (1956 [1902]: 22):

Every study or subject thus has two aspects: one for the scientist as a scientist; the other for the teacher as a teacher. These two aspects are in no sense opposed or conflicting. But neither are they immediately identical.

And, late in his career, in *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1963 [1938]: 88) reflected once more on this theme:

I am aware that the emphasis I have placed upon scientific method may be misleading, for it may result only in calling up the special technique of

laboratory research as that is conducted by specialists. But the meaning of the emphasis placed upon scientific method has little to do with specialized techniques.

Also lost in Ravitch's treatment of science and progressive education are at least two mainstreams of scientific thinking: the perspective characterized by the observation and management of phenomena by an élite (e.g. the positivist, behaviourist attitude of Watson and Skinner), as opposed to a participative, reformist social scientific view (e.g. the activist, egalitarian tradition of Dewey, Freire, etc.).

Combined, the advocates of mental measurement and of social efficiency are used by Ravitch to attack the progressives in a particularly galling manner: progressive educators are accused of limiting opportunity to those of fewer means or aptitude and consigning them to a lesser societal fate. No consequence could have been further from the conscious intent of these pragmatists who evaluated ideas in terms of their outcomes. Given Addams' sentiments, the fourth element of Cremin's definition, and the democratic socialism espoused by Dewey among others, this is a most serious allegation in *Left Back* that must be questioned, and it is at the centre of the book. For example, Ravitch writes:

... in the new way of thinking, equal opportunity meant that a banker's children would get a very different education from a coal miner's children, and all would be fitted to occupy the status of their parents (p. 90).

And,

... [Bobbitt] could see only the status quo, and his recommendations were intended to preserve that status quo by limiting opportunities for a liberal education to a very small number of boys and girls (p. 106).

However, Schubert (1986: 77), for example, provides an alternative analysis to Ravitch's assessment of the place of social efficiency in the history of curriculum ideologies in the US:

In the debate between social behaviourists (with their adherence to measurement, precision, efficiency, and mechanical technique) and experientialists (with their child-centred, progressive, democratic, problem-solving orientation), we find a monumental difference in perspective that plagues the curriculum field to this day and centres on two opposing notions of science.

A concurring, eyewitness voice is that of Paul Klohr, who taught curriculum theory until 1981 at The Ohio State University as a culmination of a career that began there in 1939 and evolved into the directorship of the Ohio State University School, an 8-Year Study school, all through the McCarthy years. Klohr (2002, personal communication: 1–2) points out the varying meanings of the term 'social efficiency' and its rise as a cyclically recurring competitor to progressive thought, rather than as an adjunct of that movement:

The 1920s was a decade of battle between two incompatible ideas which sought to control US school curriculum. The first round was won, in some measure, by the social efficiency advocates. Task and activity analysis were the

primary methods of curriculum construction. Business reform had used this approach. Bobbitt and Charters are representative of this theory . . .

In the writing of the National Society for the Study of Education's *26th Yearbook* (Rugg 1927), advocates of social efficiency and progressive education failed to reconcile their differences. Prior to 1929, the social efficiency perspective, paralleling great business expansion, gained strength. After the crash, Bobbitt and Charters' so-called 'scientific methods' offered little in a time of great social crisis. The sixth printing of Charters' *Curriculum Construction* (1929) did not strike a responsive chord. Dewey's (1985 [1931]) Inglis lecture, *The Way Out of Educational Confusion*, underlined more clearly the mood of the country and helped to strengthen progressive views of curriculum theory and practice.

Other theorists such as Hopkins (1937) in *Integration, Its Meaning and Application*, began to focus on such themes as curriculum correlation and integration—forerunners of core programmes, block scheduling, interdisciplinary studies, etc. In many respects, 1932 marked a significant move forward for the progressives. Counts (1932) wrote his famous *Dare the School Build a New Social Order*. This statement brought to the forefront the split between the child-centred and the social wings of the progressives.

This internal debate hindered the work of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), although Dewey and Bode, among others, worked hard to find a middle ground. Clearly, the influence of the social-efficiency approach to curriculum development faded well into the background . . .

The PEA's sponsorship of the Eight-Year Study did much to further progressive views. Although much of its role in US educational reform of the secondary school curriculum was lost when the Study ended at the outset of World War II, it stands as a major force in curriculum theory and reform. Among other effects, it brought to prominence a national education spokesman—namely Ralph Tyler, who had been in charge of the evaluation of the Study (Kridel and Bullough 2002).

In terms of curriculum history, social efficiency did not play a significant role again until after the 1958 National Defense Act and, of course, 30 years later in the standards and testing movements . . .

In summary, Tanner and Tanner (1975: 294) view the issue this way:

The difference between this group (Bobbitt, Charters, Peters, Snedden) who labelled its curriculum theories 'scientific', and those who argued that educational decisions should be based on carefully tested hypotheses, open to continuous verification and correction is fundamental. Included in the latter group were Dewey, Bode, and Rugg.

### **Progressive vs 'academic' visions of the curriculum: limiting opportunity**

Ravitch interprets Cremin's third element—regarding the tailoring of instruction to the needs of all learners so that none would desert the school—as fitting children for their role in society. Perhaps the central complaint of *Left Back* is that non-college-bound students—particularly the poor—were consigned by the progressives to an inferior curriculum that robbed them of opportunity and created an undemocratic stratification in US society (p. 15).

Her analysis can be challenged on several fronts. As has been suggested, the advocates for social efficiency and scientizing education are outside the progressive mainstream, authors of the ‘intriguing internal contradictions’ Cremin (1961: 369) speaks of. Additionally, however, there are at least two other responses to Ravitch’s argument. One is that the progressives faced the reality of mass secondary education and adapted to it in order to staunch dropping-out and recognized the enlarged, diverse constituency education was then being asked to serve. Or, as Ryan (2001: 19) puts it in his review of *Left Back*:

Is she not guilty of contrasting the standards of a small number of schools adapted to the requirements of middle-class and well-established families with those appropriate to a vast number of schools catering to 90% of a much bigger and more diverse population?

Tyack (2000) concurs in his review of *Left Back* and, in another objection to Ravitch’s analysis, goes on to list numerous organizations unrelated to the progressives who used their influence to move the curriculum away from the traditional. These included The National Association of Manufacturers, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the automobile industry, public health officials, etc. This, in turn, leads us back to a key, summative statement of Ryan’s (2001: 18): ‘. . . it sometimes seems that everything wrong with American public schools is to be laid at the door of progressive education. This is something that no rational person could believe.’ Or, to make the point in the words of Waller (1932: 16–17), a contemporary of the progressives:

The list of those who have sought to use the tax-supported schools as channels for their doctrines is almost as long as the list of those who have axes to grind. Prohibitionists, professional reformers, political parties, public utilities, sectarians, moralists, advocates of the open shop, labour unions, socialists, anti-vivisectionists, jingoes, chauvinists, and patrioteers—all have sought to control the curriculum, the composition of the teaching staff, and the method of instruction.

The final response to this charge of discrimination is to challenge Ravitch’s notion of the progressive curriculum. The debate is difficult to engage because she expends little effort in explaining the academic curriculum she holds up as the betrayed ideal. Here is her main definition: ‘. . . the systematic study of language and literature, science and mathematics, history, the arts, and foreign languages; these studies, commonly described today as a “liberal education” . . .’ (p. 15). William Heard Kilpatrick, a favourite target of Ravitch, along with Dewey and other progressive curricularists, is accused of ‘a relentless attack on academic subject matter’ (p. 220), although Cremin and a careful reading of the progressives themselves have exposed this generalization as a canard. The academic subject matter, which Ravitch espouses, is at the heart of progressive curriculum. Literacy, numeracy, and an historical perspective are competencies no mainstream progressive would neglect. (In order to blur this commitment, one would have to identify progressive education

with those Dewey (1963 [1938]) decries in *Experience and Education*.) These objectives are, however, to be achieved in the progressive approach through occupations, problems, activities, and projects that elicit student interest, demonstrate the usefulness and integration of knowledge, embed concretia in learning, and break down the artificial boundaries of the disciplines. The schoolroom atmosphere is not to be that of rote, drill, and decontextualized routine. These traits represent the *status quo ante* progressive education, as Butts (1985: 717) described them:

The teacher lectured or dictated a lesson and the students copied it in their notebooks. The students then learned by heart what was in their notebooks and recited what they learned from their textbooks. . . . Students sat at rows of desks fastened to the floor, and could not move or talk except with permission.

Embedding learning in authentic inquiry is at the heart of such celebrated contemporary school reforms in the US as Foxfire (Wigginton 1991), Essential Schools (Sizer 1996), and the Centre for Advanced Research and Technology (CART 2002). Ravitch places herself in a more than conservative position when she argues solely for discrete disciplinary organization of the curriculum—taught apart from application and when she neglects innovations of method, such as service learning, various project approaches, and internships. By her analysis, she suggests that an absorption in the disciplines themselves should be the goal of K–12 education instead of an emphasis on the disciplines as means of solving human problems and as tools that evolve over time. Where was computer science or biotechnology in past curricula? Of course, her arguments fit well with high-stakes testing/standards movement of today's US educational policy-making: any review of US 'curriculum standards' reveals laundry lists of knowledge objectives with an inadequate sense of priority, proportionality, or application. Accountability is by means of the timed, objective standardized test that further abstracts knowledge from its place in the lived experience. Ravitch is providing an historical defence for a return to the traditional school—one to which she would not consign her own children (as she notes in her acknowledgments—they attended a 'private progressive school' (p. 533)). It is in all little wonder that she minimizes her descriptions of the ideal curriculum. They likely would not stand up to cursory examination. Ryan (2001: 20) summarizes her position this way:

. . . there is an almost wholly implicit defence of a particular kind of school, very often described by contradiction—that is, by indicating what contemporary schools largely are not.

Tyack (2000) makes a different, also cogent, response to Ravitch's faith in her preferred curriculum. He points out that hers is another utopian vision imposed over a set of disciplines that are fluid, rife with internal contradictions, and constantly moving together in new syntheses. Additionally, the 'essentialist' curriculum of Ravitch should be seen more in the tradition of 'liberal arts' than 'liberal education'. The former has as its hallmark its connection to a classical 'academic tradition', while the latter is linked to the living goal of liberating consciousness from the bonds of

ignorance, prejudice, and habit. Rousseau, in *Emile*, spoke in this vein of freeing the heart from vice and the mind from error.

It is also worth noting that reformers at the turn of the 20th century fought for the introduction of science, modern languages, and history, as Ravitch documents (p. 43). Yet, she seems to suggest that those are the last curricular reforms that should have occurred. In Ravitch's world-view, today's new structures of knowledge, as well as the pedagogies to convey them—including learning styles, differentiated learning, and multiple intelligences—are not on the side of the angels. Her implicit conclusion is that curricular renewal should have ended in 1900 when, coincidentally, the progressives entered the stage.

### **An ironic biography for Dewey**

A recurring theme throughout *Left Back* is that Dewey was complicitous in the abuses of progressive education because, although he criticized extremists, his criticisms were not incisive enough:

[Dewey] refrained from criticizing the psychologists at Stanford, Teachers College, Harvard, Michigan and elsewhere who were then creating and disseminating the ideas and practices he abhorred. He named no names. . . . Thus, Dewey pulled his punches. (p. 151)

Over the years, Dewey was far too tolerant of fellow progressives who adored children but abhorred subject matter . . . (p. 173)

Yet, Dewey never rebuked his disciple, never dissociated himself from Kilpatrick's view that how children learn is critically important but what they learn is irrelevant. (p. 182)

But, Dewey (1963 [1938]) in *Experience and Education* offered no reproof for public schools that offered different curricula for different youngsters, based on their likely occupation, nor did he chastise public schools that were institutionalizing social conformism and anti-intellectualism . . . (p. 308)

Cremin treated the same issues vis-à-vis Dewey with a much different, arguably more objective style. Cremin can be seen as working toward a subtle portrayal as opposed to settling for a partisan tone and heated language. Note Cremin's (1961) approach on these same issues, respectively:

In an article slamming into President [George B.] Cutten [of Colgate University] [Dewey] too pointed out that the tests were a helpful classificatory device, but that their use beyond classification had reprehensible social overtones . . . Barring complete imbecility, he continued, even the most limited member of the citizenry had potentialities that could be enhanced by a genuine education for individuality. 'Democracy will not be democracy until education makes it its chief concern to release distinctive aptitudes in art, thought, and companionship'. Insofar as tests assisted this goal, they could serve the cause of progress; insofar as they tended in the name of science to sink individuals into numerical classes, they were essentially antithetical to democratic social policy. (pp. 190–191)



Yet, as the 1920s progressed, [Dewey] became less the interpreter and synthesizer of the progressive education movement, and increasingly its critic. As early as 1926, for example, he attacked the studied lack of adult guidance in the child-centred schools with a sharpness uncommon in his writing. ‘Such a method’, he observed, ‘is really stupid’. (p. 234)

[Bode and Kilpatrick] disagreed significantly in those elements within the progressive tradition each sought to emphasize. But they were one with Dewey in the contention that education is a continuing reconstruction of experience, one in the faith that the supreme task of education is the development of a civilization dedicated to the progressive liberation of intelligence, and one in the belief that schools could never accomplish this task without a thorough-going transformation in spirit as well as practice. Certainly, these similarities are at least as important as any differences in estimating the wider significance of Bode and Kilpatrick in the progressive education movement. (p. 224)

... however scandalous the charge that Dewey idealized organisation men or, indeed, that their abundance can be traced to his influence on American education, the charge is not downed merely by quoting from the master’s books. Rather, there is need for further systematic study of Dewey’s work and the context in which it proceeded, so that the changes he wrought can be distinguished from the changes he explained—or indeed, criticized. (p. 239)

As demonstrated here, in *Left Back*, Ravitch takes issue with Dewey for his public positions, but in a manner more pregnant with ideology than with discretion. Perhaps the most curious allegation is one derived from Dewey’s comments in a lecture published when he was over 70 years of age: ‘Dewey was naïve about how his ideas could be implemented in the public schools’ (p. 59). The philosopher may have been circumspect, he may have been gentle, but by this point in his life it is difficult to imagine he was naïve. A comparison of the parallel citations above raises legitimate questions about the fairness of *Left Back* and illustrates why it can be seen as a work of punditry rather than history. Cremin wrestles with the ambiguities and imprecision of writing a history of this diverse movement; Ravitch reflects little doubt as she moves headlong toward controversial, often unprecedented, assertions.

The reason for this apparent lack of self-doubt may be that Ravitch is the doyenne of a certain segment of educationists in the US who are respected by policymakers and the media while being marginalized by the academic establishment. Thus, *Left Back* was widely, and in general positively, reviewed by the most prestigious of mainstream publications, including *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, etc. (There is a strong negative correlation, however, between reviewer enthusiasm and the writer’s credentials as a scholar in education or in any relevant discipline.) Its sales are more than respectable. In preparing this essay review, however, I repeatedly found that respected educators, knowledgeable about progressive education and qualified to evaluate *Left Back*, neither had read the book nor planned to. More than a dozen were contacted. Ravitch’s work for whatever reason did not compel their attention. If the thesis explored here is accurate—that *Left*

*Back* is less history than advocacy—their position is understandable. This outcome does limit scholarly debate, however, and allows *Left Back* to stand largely unchallenged in the public forum. The phenomenon of scholars of education declining to engage a book of this magnitude is symptomatic of the splits that occur in this large profession. One such example is that of public school leadership and professors of education; another, as in this instance, is between education policy-makers or media spokespersons and mainstream education scholars.

### Dewey the dichotomizer

Ravitch, in a final irony, excoriates Dewey for being caught in the grip of dichotomies. ‘With the perspective of time, it is striking to recognize that Dewey was locked in dualisms, the famous “either-ors” that he so often wrote about’ (p. 40). This allegation will come as a surprise to many students of Dewey, since his public intention throughout his career was the reconciliation of opposites, as he clearly stated in writings like *Democracy and Education* (1997) and *Experience and Education* (1963)—whose opening chapters are dedicated to this issue. Cremin (1961: 123) calls him ‘an avowed enemy of dualism’. On the other hand, Ravitch’s style of analysis frequently moves toward the creation of straw men and ‘either-ors’ as she seeks to cast progressive education in the least favourable light by unfairly defining progressives who in fact sought the centre as extremists. The exaggerations and over-simplifications are familiar:

Perhaps it did not matter that the new schools of pedagogy had a single-minded devotion to utility and a bias against intellect. (p. 119)

When [teachers] were no longer expected to teach subject matter, they had little reason to study it, and they studied pedagogy instead. (p. 244)

The response to *A Nation at Risk* revealed a major fault line in American education: On one side were those who believed that the schools had little influence on children’s ability to learn as compared to children’s heredity, families, and social environment. On the other were those who believed that schools had the responsibility to educate *all* children regardless of their social circumstances or home life. (p. 415)

Cremin (1961: 237) commented on this manner of dealing with Dewey when he wrote, ‘. . . the grossest caricatures of his work have come from otherwise intelligent commentators in the US and abroad. One is led to wonder why’. Dewey (1963: 17) himself observed as a warning that ‘Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites . . . in terms of *Either-Ors* . . .’. *Left Back* is less successful at labelling Dewey a dualist than in establishing dualism as its own favoured form of analysis. For the reader this is a source of frustration since the primary tension of the book—between progressive and traditional education—is insufficiently joined. The academic curriculum, as discussed above, is only defined by implication and is, therefore, impossible to hold to meaningful standards.

### Advocacy vs authority in scholarship

The insidious anti-intellectualism that riddles this book, and which is manifest in selective reading, oversimplification, and slanting of the historic record, and in reliance on rhetorical tactics, ultimately undermines Ravitch's glorification of the academic curriculum and denigration of progressive education. (Wraga 2001: 38)

Inquiry into education and the curriculum is imperfectly advanced by polemics. US journals of opinion and the popular media continually offer heated prose on educational issues that casts little light on the problems teachers face. Media punditry has politicized, and even theologized, educational issues to an unhealthy degree, leading to concerns about the future of the public schools in the US. Even more troubling is that some of those who opine against public education have serious, undeclared conflicts of interest and stand to gain materially from the privatization of our schools. *Left Back* fits comfortably into this landscape. It is identifiable as a programme of one political faction against the heroes and values of another. It serves the agenda of a broad, national network of foundations, think-tanks, centres, and publications that aggressively propagandize in unison against what they see as the 'education establishment' (Shaker and Heilman 2002: 3). Almost incidentally it is a text about education and, particularly, the curriculum. When contrasted with the painstaking fairness of Cremin's (1961) *The Transformation of the School* or the balance and self-criticism of Dewey's works, it is of an unrelated genre. This generic differentiation can explain the easy dismissal of *Left Back* by many scholars. From one perspective, their judgement is not incorrect: in this case the cover does reveal the book. The volume proceeds seamlessly from Ravitch's very public politics and offers few deviations from the predictable. One can hope, however, that a further discussion will ensue: one that extends Cremin's respected history, now out of print, with new scholarship. In the meantime, we have *Left Back* to reflect upon and to inform our judgement of the course the public debate on education has taken.

The form and the direction of US public education are at stake in this policy discourse. Opponents of the public schools are numerous and range from sincere reformers to those who see a profit to be made, even at the expense of children. Within the school, public or private, the struggle to shape the curriculum continues with the advocates of control and rote learning creating a new language of high-stakes testing and state standards with all its punitive overtones. On the other extreme are those who argue for an unrestricted Romanticism, à la Summerhill, for example (although this style of advocacy has been rare since the 1960s). Somewhere in the middle are educators arguing for authentic assessment, the construction of experience, balanced instruction in literacy, and the engagement of learners. The tension of this debate runs deep in US society and is derived from core values individuals hold about the relative goodness of human nature, the merits of discipline vs interest as motivators, and the connection of schooling to scientific and social renewal. The philosophic tendency toward Idealism, Realism, or Pragmatism is another overlay that is heuristic. In some essential ways, the situation is strikingly similar to what it was when

Dewey started the University Elementary School in Chicago. This is so because the conflict mirrors, to apply one analysis, the Apollonian and Dionysian world-views Nietzsche spoke of. The view of those who believe that order is the path to enlightenment and progress is contrasted with that of those who 'follow their bliss' and rapture with the same goals in mind.

For educators, there must be a place for discipline *and* desire, for nurturance *as well as* order in designing the common school and its curriculum. Striking a balance between such factors in just the right measure—student by student, in each teacher's classroom, every day—is both complex and daunting. The 20th century has not been, in Ravitch's words, 'a century of failed school reforms'. It has been a remarkable and revolutionary century in the history of schooling, and only the second century in which truly mass education has even been attempted. Inevitably, the schools have been drawn into US culture wars, racial conflicts, and class struggles, and *Left Back* is a document in that history more than it is itself a history. The public schools are prevailing: high among the people's priorities, expanding, addressing unprecedented social problems in new ways, and dogged as neighbourhood outposts of democratic and humanistic values. A true reform struggle is played out in public classrooms daily and dedicated people are involved. Their spirit is that of progressive education.

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