

READING RAVITCH AND RHEE: A STUDY ON LIBERAL THOUGHT AND  
REFERENCES TO CAPITAL

by

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## ABSTRACT

READING RAVITCH AND RHEE: A STUDY ON LIBERAL THOUGHT AND REFERENCES TO CAPITAL

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This thesis explores the ideas of Diane Ravitch and Michelle Rhee as representatives of the contemporary American education reform debate in an attempt to examine the convergences between neo-liberal and liberal thought. It employs a symptomatic reading of the former's *Reign of Error* and the latter's *Radical* to uncover a shared orientation toward the question of labor and interrogate the democratic critique of neo-liberal reform agendas. The study finds that the omission of capitalism is characteristic of both and reveals commonalities between Ravitch and Rhee's orientation to the teaching profession. It concludes that liberal and neo-liberal reform proposals are virtually the same in this respect despite surface distinctions such as the former's commitment to democratic organization and latter's infatuation with market governance.

## **DIFFERENCES IN A SHARED ORIENTATION**

Two of the leading figures within the American education debate differ greatly in their approach to school reform; yet, both appear to be motivated by a desire to improve the American school system. Michelle Rhee, who has garnered a reputation for being tough on mediocrity and uncompromising on the need to establish greater accountability in school systems, has framed her reform agenda as placing students' interest above all others. In her view, improvements in education start by removing poor educators as well as removing institutional practices and systems responsible for allowing them to continue in their current positions. Diane Ravitch's reputation stems from her work as an education historian and advisor. She has modified her position on school reform in recent years expanding the scope of her analysis of school reform to consider social, political and economic factors external to schooling proper. Her approach is best understood as a measured, careful attempt to improve existing educational institutions without undoing gains made in the past. Today, she favors greater autonomy for educators to practice and perform their craft.

Are these two positions antithetical or do they in fact share an ideological orientation. Partisans within the education reform debate tend to downplay commonalities within their respective positions, preferring to cast Rhee as a

member of a powerful coalition of contemporary neoliberal reformists and Ravitch as an apologist for Progressive Era education practices. However, scholars critical of education in America introduce confusion when they subsume neoliberal and allied positions under the term Right but fail to categorize the ideas and practices of progressive educators. Some critical educators identify progressivism as an essential aspect of the Left while others view them as having an affinity to the Right. The distinction is important since it is used to differentiate the Left's commitment to social justice from the Right's apparent acquiescence to dominating status and class hierarchies.

But are conceptions of right or left sufficient to understand what's at stake in this debate? Do views and statements on education fit into these neat categories? Could these labels occlude rather than illuminate some important overlap in the positions of Rhee and Ravitch, or mask an underlying ideology that is common to both?

Contemporary studies highlight how competing groups form alliances and compromise conflicting ideological perspectives as they navigate the political terrain of education reform. Nonetheless, the perspectives represented in Rhee and Ravitch appear to lack the potential for compromise, much less an allegiance. Moreover, those sharing Rhee's views argue Progressive Era education ideas are incompatible with sound management practices of today's world and are responsible for the repeated failures of past reform efforts. Conversely, Ravitch and her allies charge Rhee and her ilk with discounting the embeddedness of school

systems within socioeconomic contexts out of ignorance or in an effort to profit. Considering their individual backgrounds and positions, there is even greater doubt that a Rhee/Ravitch reform alliance is achievable.

*Michelle Rhee*

A former Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools, Michelle Rhee is best known for her strict, brash and unyielding stance on school reform. She gained experience by teaching three years with The New Teachers Project. The New Teachers project recruited teachers to work in urban neighborhoods across the country. After her tenure she went to work for them and recruited an estimated 25,000 teachers over the course of 10 years. To help mitigate problems in the schools, Rhee proposes changes that would presumably increase the knowledge about best school practices via standardized testing; incentivize compensation schemes to attract, motivate and retain potential and existing educators (merit-based pay); reorganize governance structures to improve bargaining strength for principals (e.g. mayoral control and charter school expansion); and reconfigure institutional arrangements to strengthen enforcement mechanisms (e.g. removing tenure as a part of collective bargaining).

According to Rhee, schools in America do not operate in accordance with student interests. She states the repeated compromises between teachers' unions, school officials and other groups have created a situation where school systems undermine student achievement and academic excellence. As a result, Rhee feels it is necessary to hold these groups and their constituencies accountable by

reorganizing school systems so that evaluation and decisions are made based on performance measures rather than to appease certain groups. On the surface, her position appears to be sound and sensible if we accept its premise.

*Diane Ravitch*

Serving as Assistant Secretary of Education under the Bush Administration and current research professor for New York University's Steninhart School of Culture, Education and Human Development, there are few who can rival Ravitch's experience both as a scholar and administrator. Her career in the field of education spans three decades, which unsurprisingly has led to many changes in perspective and outlook. Most recently she has become a vocal critic of contemporary reform efforts to expand standardized testing, charter schools and undercut teacher unions after advocating similar measures as one of the architects of the No Child Left Behind Act. Her articles and books on the subject document the negative effects, questionable strategies and dubious assumptions of these efforts. Given the politicization and encroachment of corporate interests, Ravitch calls into question whether or not what passes for reform today is in fact a genuine effort to improve education in America

In place of this agenda, Ravitch basis her own on the belief that greater professional autonomy will allow teacher's to self-govern and take the lead with regard to improving America's schools. When afforded the same professional courtesy as doctors and lawyers, if not more, educators will do what is necessary to uplift the profession and improve America's school systems as they have done



countless times in the past. Her vision for America's education system includes: 1) increased standards/training for educators; 2) professional autonomy for educators to perform their job where they are largely responsible for holding themselves accountable through peer reviews (here presumes a kind of professional ethic rather than opportunism; teacher's unions); 3) democratic governance of schools through a kind of federalist arrangement/organization (system of checks and balances between federal state, and local school officials where their roles are clarified); and 4) job security (tenure).

Ravitch's vision contrasts sharply with the practices and legislation Rhee deems necessary. In point of fact, the latter's tenure as School Chancellor of DCPS came at a time when the school system came under mayoral control and was stripped an the elected school board – a move Rhee she suggests should be available to all parents low-performing school districts. Yet, in spite of these facts, Rhee and Ravitch claim to be motivated by a commitment to achieving educational equality.

Rhee contends that a school system should work for all students regardless of poverty and that issues such as poverty and race should not determine educational outcomes. She dismisses any attempt to demonstrate this relationship as she emphasizes the role of the teacher and teacher productivity as the primary factor in educational outcomes. Ravitch would agree with normative aspect of this sentiment but take issue with the choice to focus almost exclusively on school factors, as these do not tell the entire story. Still both assert that the opportunity for all students to attain a high level education is a fundamental right and that equal

educational opportunities should be afforded regardless of the social, cultural and economic conditions schools confront. Both adopt this orientation toward school reform despite the differences and conflicting nature of their respective viewpoints.

This study takes seriously the ideas Rhee and Ravitch have of themselves and does not downplay the overlap between their views. Instead, it views them as representatives of a neoliberalism and classical liberalism respectively while questioning the connection between these presumed contradictory positions. Classical liberals reproach the neoliberal infatuation with markets and choice in contemporary school reform agendas as being inherently at odds with a commitment to democratic procedures and practices protecting public welfare from private interests. Interestingly, neoliberals counter by defending school choice reforms and parent trigger laws allowing parent groups to grant district officials the authority to take control of and institute drastic measures in an individual school as categorically democratic.

These commitments to democracy, like the egalitarian ones, compel us to revisit conceptions of various reform currents in terms of their orientations. One way to do so is by drawing from statements of their representatives to assess what is reflected in them that is meaningful, normative and ideological without reducing them to individual or group-specific perspectives. Rhee and Ravitch's writings, articles and speeches suggest an internalization of the aforementioned perspectives, which might help us assess the differences and commonalities between classical

liberalism and neoliberalism. More importantly, they can help us address misconceptions within the debate and, if possible, expose an underlying ideology.

Althusser's (1968) contention that "there is no such thing as an innocent reading" echoes sociological criticisms of a value-free science. The critical theory tradition, especially as it is represented the writings of Michael Apple, does not shy away from making value judgments about observed phenomena. In fact, it in many ways guides the research project. If a critical theory of education aims at negating power asymmetries between teachers and school officials, public and corporate interests, among others, then it must name them accordingly rather than bury them beneath terms allowing for their immediate empirical description.

## NEO-LIBERALISM, MICHAEL APPLE AND POLICY ISSUES

### *Conceiving Neo-liberalism*

Scholars of neoliberalism have suggested that the rise of neoliberalism has rendered old political categories useless or outdated. Mudge's "What is Neo-Liberalism" (2008) sets out to deal directly with the question of "how to make sense of old political categories in the neo-liberal age" (p. 2). In it she discusses 'third way' policies and European integration as examples of how neoliberalism fails to fit neatly into Left/Right distinctions. Bockman (2011) points out how various political currents (e.g. conservatives and socialists) have reoriented themselves within this new era illustrating how ideologies are historically and socially conditioned. While scholars and political actors find some utility in old political categories, these facts highlight their ever-changing nature and the need to employ a dynamic, dialectical approach to reading individual and distinct viewpoints.

Scholars writing about neoliberalism have focused on the new role of the state as powerful and minimalist. David Harvey's writes, "the neoliberal state should favor strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade" (Harvey 2007:64). Sharpe (2009) uses social contract doctrine as an analytic tool to distinguish liberal and illiberal thought; concluding that neo-liberal thought (via Friedrich Hayek) lends it to

illiberal conceptions of the state given its constructivism. However, my view is that the state is not much different in liberal and neo-liberal periods and that neo-liberalism and classical liberal share salient, convergent viewpoints.

Other scholars have emphasized the belief in markets to efficiently and fairly distribute goods and services, operating as its own governance structure.<sup>1</sup> Melamed (2006) illustrates how neoliberalism is endorsed as key to a post-racist world by linking multiculturalism and free market organization. Apple (2007) demonstrates how educational scholars link markets to strict accountability regimes as they advance educational agendas thought to raise education quality and reduce achievement gaps. Though the ascension of markets from an analytic concept to moral category may signal the rise of a new age in politics where discourses favor neoliberal perspectives, the moral force of market organization is felt on account of how it conditions human activity. The fact that policy debates are now anchored about the morality of the market only brings to the forefront the thin moral grounding upon which capitalist production rests.

Those interested in exploring links between neo-liberalisms and other forms of liberalism tend to point out the difference between their respective commitments to democracy. Lemke (2015) criticizes the Texas curriculum policy process and neoliberal discourses for privileging certain forms of knowledge running counter to

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<sup>1</sup> While not a scholar of neo-liberalism, this focus has much in common with the new institutional economics school in which Oliver Williamson has been a leading contributor (See *Markets and Hierarchies* (1978) & "The Theory of the Firm as Governance Structure: From Choice to Contract" (2002)).

democratic procedure. Davies' essay "The Democratic Critique of Neo-liberalism" (2015), a review of Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neo-Liberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), underscores the conflict between the economization and democracy arguing that a space for the latter has always existed up until the rise neo-liberalism. Likewise, Hursh (2007) sees the rise of neo-liberalism as a movement away from a social democratic liberalism. Yet, democratic organization along with its mechanisms for dealing with competing political agendas persist for those wealthy enough to be included to say nothing of the exclusive social clubs operating as spheres for public discourse.

Critical educators take a different approach, preferring to subsume neoliberalism under the term right or right-wing. Kevin Kumashiro begins *Seduction of Common Sense* (2008) distinguishing the right and left defining the former as those who favor policies and activities upholding status quo hierarchies based in race, gender and class. They associate participatory democracy and socialist projects to increase individual autonomy and freedom with the political left. However, a commitment to these latter ideals does not necessarily lend itself to an articulation of policy agendas or political objectives of the same type.

That there are left-wing neo-liberals is but another indication of the affinity between classical liberalism and neo-liberalism. Critics of neo-liberalism depict it as wholly 'anti-democratic' and 'anti-egalitarian' charging its representatives with being opportunistic and disinterested in truly tackling inequality. Interestingly Hogan (1979) argues that the progressive nature of classical liberalism is overstated

especially with respect to its claims to egalitarian and democracy. That respect for individual freedoms and concerns for problems of equality do not necessarily equate to egalitarian and democratic objectives. Similarly, left-wing commitments to distributive justice as well as social and economic democracy do not necessarily equate to policy agendas and objectives of the same kind. When critical theorists use the right-left classifications without concern for contradictions in thought and knowledge of those they label, they make mistakes in their classification.

For Apple (2004), the right is a coalition of neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists and managerial classes he labels 'fractions of capital.' Like independent threads woven to produce a single article, he reveals how each employ contradictory discourses to consolidate their power as one bloc. Still, in order for these distinct ideological currents to legitimate actual relations of capital and thereby warrant their classification as 'fractions of capital,' it would seem they must succeed in making sacred something germane or fundamental to capitalism itself. Since, legitimacy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for maintaining order, those 'fractions' or political currents successful at legitimating relations of capital stand a greater chance when they manage to align their orientation with constituent groups by calibrating their own or redirecting others'. Apple (2007) would agree that the success of a particular agenda depends in large part on the extent to which proponents are able to articulate visions congruent with the public.

Emirbayer (1992) demonstrates this much in his historical account of Progressive education reform. His work is also a theoretical exercise in voluntarist

and structuralist theory. In many ways, I attempt something similar except here I explore the convergences between two distinct ideologies. The focus is on subjective (rather than objective) constraints from the standpoint of two individuals seeking to improve America's educational system. Given the relative dominance of neo-liberal and liberal perspectives within the education reform debate, it is unlikely that any reform current could articulate a policy objective, agenda or view without in some way confronting liberal notions of democracy and equal opportunity.

Unmediated by liberalism, reform agendas articulated within capitalism will have difficulty exerting influence within the debate and garnering support. Michelle Rhee has had little trouble in this respect given the neo-liberal, managerial character of her reform platform. Ravitch, articulating a more of classical, social-democratic liberal position, has had success building a constituency of supporters to mount a counter-hegemonic movement. These two present an excellent opportunity to explore further the parts played by liberalism and capitalism in American education reform as well as salvage the critical educationalist project.

#### *Apple and the Critical Educators*

Few scholarly traditions have examined the relationship between neoliberalism and education than the critical education tradition. Michael Apple is largely its most recognizable and esteemed figure having published numerous articles and texts exploring ideological phenomena within curriculum and pedagogical practice and recently with regard to policy articulation and development. As a critical theorist, he aims to develop theory that is capable of



providing insights and becoming a material force for change. As such, his critique of ideology and ideological mechanisms within education has resulted in explorations into social movements and political coalition building.

Apple approaches education from the standpoint of cultural and economic reproduction, socialization, and societal stability. He conceives the school as an important institution for economic and cultural reproduction, becoming an agent by which certain categories and ideas become internalized and apprehended by individual members of society (Apple 1979). Later works discuss how politicians appropriate the concerns of dominated groups and the language of progressives in order to institute policies that enable dominant social groups to maintain control (Apple 2007; Stein 2010). Thus, while domination exists in Apple's conception of society in the form of numerous mechanisms and processes supporting unequal power, it is not complete.

An important part of securing domination involves cultivating and disseminating ideas capable of legitimating favorable institutional organizations and legitimizing efforts to renovate them when necessary. Thus the power struggle is necessarily an ideological one complete with competing definitions of the 'good' and 'just.' Apple (2007) illustrates how the struggle for power results in ideological complexities and imbalances that make for 'thin' rather than 'thick' morality. This claim is supported by Melinda Lemke (2015) and Edward Berman (1995) where both present the normative declarations of neoliberal and neoconservative reformers as shallow, empty attempts to garner support. Additionally, Thomas

Popkewitz (2008) provides evidence of this much in his study of the historical development of pedagogical practices in America and its relation with cosmopolitanism. In it he shows that the definition of “Other” forms an important basis for policies that include “all children” or “leave no child behind.” Classifying disadvantaged, urban children as “Other” suggest that they somehow fall outside the moral center insofar as it defines the rights and privileges of the recognized members of the community to which it pertains.

In an effort to interrupt the aforementioned processes and mechanisms, Apple and others have sought answers by studying social movements. Dennis Carlson (1993) demonstrates how counter-hegemonic discourses challenge the unified hegemonic discourses in periods of relative political stability and give rise to new political coalitions. In a similar study Jose Marichal (2009) presents a three-stage process by which frames evolve alongside the development of a social movement characterized by a broad coalition of distinct actors. Apple collaborator Thomas Pedroni (2005) presents the idea of conditional alliances to illustrate how dominated groups (i.e. those that are not apart of the hegemonic power bloc) are able to exert some agency and influence. He argues, that dominated groups sometimes form conditional alliances that are not always vertically ordered. For example, in his article “Market Movements and the Dispossessed” he describes the charter school movement and other so-called Rightist policy victories as partial victories for progressive educators as well. Presumably charter laws will enable this latter group “to form schools more closely aligned with a radically democratic

educational social vision” (Pedroni 2005:93-94). Referring to the non-hegemonic and dominated groups he argues we must:

...realize the heterogeneous qualities of groups that are sutured/articulated to the hegemonic alliance in fleeting and temporary conditional alliances, we also need to think clearly about the quality of the conservative victories implicit in such alliances. (Ibid.: 93-94)

Pedroni goes on to assert that the victories by the so-called hegemonic Right are not monolithic but presents an opportunity for dominated and/or outside groups much the same way as progressive educators are able to take advantage of charter school policies even though they view them as a way to undermine the democratic controls built into tradition public schooling. In other words, opportunities to counter and upset existing power asymmetries and build radical alternatives arise and can materialize through collective activities.

Apple’s contribution to this literature can be found in the concept of a hegemonic alliance comprised of various ideological factions working in concert and exerting great control over school reform and educational institutions. For Apple, a hegemonic alliance is a dynamic, yet relatively stable entity changing in accordance with its historical period. In “Creating Difference” (2004), he refers to a new power bloc comprised of multiple fractions of capital increasing its influence over “education and all things social” as well as integrating “education into a wider set of ideological commitments” (p. 15). This new alliance includes commitments to neo-liberal marketized solutions; a “common culture;” tradition; and techniques of accountability measurement and ‘management.’ Despite “clear tensions and

conflicts” the alliance aims to provide educational conditions believed necessary for increasing “international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school” (Apple 2004:15).

Apple’s conceptualization of the four alliance members is generated from a careful reading of the meanings and terms they employ. It’s unclear why he refers to them as ‘fractions of capital,’ however most familiar with Apple’s work will know that he looks at how language is used to arrive at its meaning rather than transfer meanings onto those employing a certain language (Apple 1978, 2006). This contrasts sharply with frame analysis approach employed by fellow critical theorist Kevin Kumashiro (2008) who uses it to demonstrate how the Right has succeeded in reframing the discourse surrounding education. He goes on to argue that the American public has been seduced into embracing standardized testing measures, back-to-basics curriculums, school choice initiatives and a host of other reform proposals.

Apple steers clear of reducing the contents of a cultural tradition to underlying meaning-complexes. Thus, where Kumashiro draws parallels between notions of a strict-father and authoritarian, top-down reform proposals, Apple would have us explore how or why such proposals become legitimate in the minds of the American public. For Apple, this involves actually investigating their thoughts and ideas, similar to Leonardo (2003), rather than resting the analysis on arbitrary associations. The analysis of text is one of Apple’s greatest strengths as he critiques contemporary education scholars and educational structures.

In this thesis, I take a similar approach with two popular reform figures – interrogating their thoughts, positions and views in an effort to reveal an underlying ideological orientation. I differ with Apple in that I refrain from transferring political categories of left and right onto those presumed to fit the definition. Instead I use what they say and propose to determine what this says about their respective political position.

### *Opposing Viewpoints*

A reading of the literature education policy and debate participants reveals a kind of policy talk anchored in dichotomous oppositions. With the rise of neoliberalism, education reform became an exercise in expanding standardized testing, school choice and competition under the guise these will improve the quality of education and reduce achievement gaps between races and classes (Hursh 2007). On the other hand, a coalition of anti-neoliberal forces has formed to reassert and reestablish the importance of democratic organization and protection of the public domain from competitive market forces and private domain. This battle is reflected in policy discussions regarding the efficacies of neo-liberal reform policies and publicity given to certain participants within the policy debate.

Standardized testing has been looked to as a panacea of sorts for low academic achievement and underperformance in the nation's schools. Testing advocates point to China, Taiwan and other testing cultures to reasons why America is not on par with other industrialized nations when it comes to education. For testing advocates, raising the quality of education starts establishing curriculum and

instruction standards and then evaluating whether or not they are being met.

However, not all agree with this approach.

Opponents of standardized testing counter with their own international examples of how to organize and administer a national education system. They argue that coordination and cooperation among educators is the defining characteristic of consistently top performing nations such as Finland and other Nordic countries. That the one best system necessarily involves raising the level of the education profession on par with the kind of respect and autonomy given to medical and legal practitioners. Such arguments center on a debate about America's competitive advantage and national security.

School choice advocates seek to introduce and cultivate a competitive cultural climate. They argue that the inability to choose schools and teachers reduces the quality of education because the system lacks incentive to improve performance and attract talent (Friedman and Friedman 1990). Additionally, the argument could be made that residents who have experienced decades of disappointment with neighborhood schools justifiably lose faith in them (Neckerman 2010). Yet, the faith in choice and competition appears somewhat misplaced to some.

The case against competition as a philosophical world view and essential part of a collective belief system is challenged by Alfie Kohn (2013) and Bertrand Russell ([1932] 1967)). As if in anticipation of today's claims about competition, Russell (2013) contends "competition is not only bad as an educational fact, but also as an ideal to be held before the young" (p. 111). Perhaps even more intriguing is

the sense that the shortcomings within America's education system are exaggerated and being made to fit neoliberal narratives about standards, choice and competition in a misguided effort to advance a political agenda.

Education historians and scholars counter neoliberal claims, arguing that educational shortcomings and problems are often greatly exaggerated and overly worrisome (Tyack and Cuban 1997). Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System (2011)* is a book-length criticism of how testing and school choice initiatives have not only failed to produce results but have actually had the opposite effect. Others feel such initiatives are necessary to avoid the repeated failures of past reform efforts (Hess 2006, 2010).

The struggle over competition, school choice and standardize testing appears indicative of a larger, more significant struggle as well as a smaller, narrower battle between leading figures. Emirbayer (1992) tells us that the struggle over the legitimate definition of sacred ideals was a fundamental condition for the educational changes in American. The coverage of Ravitch and Rhee reflects this struggle in several different ways. Andrew Delblanco's (2013) pits Rhee's 'fanatical faith' in competition against Ravitch's empirically-based criticism while Goldstein (2011) casts Ravitch as the 'Anti-Rhee' owing to differences over the question of teachers. Ravitch believes popular reform initiatives scapegoats, demoralizes and shames them; Rhee believes it necessary to increase accountability and monitor performance (Layton 2011).

Rhee's faith in competition and managerial perspective are in many ways easy to disparage given all the movement within academia and among intellectuals to counter neoliberalism; for criticisms of Ravitch on the other hand journalists present a more complex figure, not easily classified along conservative-liberal lines. Lowe's 2011 article titled "Diane Ravitch Revised" recalls her long association with conservative educational spaces and attempts to make sense of those ideological foundations in light of her newfound popularity among liberal constituencies and groups such as teachers unions. Carey (2011) details how she has managed to distance herself from the school choice and testing reforms she at one time supported (See Ravitch (2010a, 2010b).

The evolution of Ravitch's ideas on educational reform along with the shifting political terrain highlighted by the rise of neoliberalism illustrates the need for concepts capable of accommodating the transitory, complex nature of attitudes and perspectives. Moe's *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public (2002)* examines public perceptions of school vouchers demonstrating how liberal notions of equity explain some of the support for these reform initiatives. Pedroni's *Market Movements (2007)* used ethnographic methods to uncover the ideological and political complexities of African American parents' support for vouchers and how they do not neatly align with the official justification advanced by conservative and neoliberal education reformers. Pedroni's critical treatment of reform perspectives is refreshing when compared with others limiting opinions and views to conceptual boxes. Hess' *So Much Reform, So Little Change (2010)* reduces the battle over school



reform to those who favor modern management practices adopted in nearly every industry and those who defend outdated Fordist-style organization. The politics of education reform is not so simplistic nor is it useful to think of debate participants like Rhee and Ravitch in such reductionist terms.

## READING REPRESENTATIVE TEXTS

There are few figures within American education whose ideas exert great influence and yet appear so greatly at odds than Michelle Rhee and Diane Ravitch. Rhee's *Radical* is a quintessential account of how groups dominating the discourse and policy agenda today approach the issue of education reform. Conversely, Ravitch's *Reign of Error* affirms the interests and views emanating from teachers' organizations. The power struggle exhibited by these competing perspectives offers insight into the socio-cultural milieu in which the reform debate is carried out and can help us discern the utility of Right/Left political designations.

These texts offer comprehensive accounts of their respective positions. Additionally they provide a level of access to their respective ideas not found in their articles and speeches. In an effort to familiarize myself with the language and terms they tend to employ, I surveyed a number of speeches, published articles and, in the case of Rhee, examined her organization's website. In many ways, *Radical* and *Reign of Error* are personal statements, written at a time where they have had sufficient opportunity to think through their opinions and views on the topic and of one another. In them, there are depictions of the others viewpoints, some more accurate than others – as well as arguments anticipating each other's rebuttals and counterarguments.

Short of a one on one interview, an analysis of the discourse is the best way to interrogate their respective approaches. Since meeting them was not possible, I settled on an individual text that would allow comparable access to their positions and thus the ideological contents. The texts, I believe, are analogous to an open ended response in a survey questionnaire where both Rhee and Ravitch are allowed to provide as much information as they desire. Indeed, both texts read as an overview of their respective viewpoints complete with reasons and rationales that would have been difficult to capture even with the most comprehensive of survey instruments. The great benefit of a discursive analysis of these texts is the access it provides to underlying meanings.

First each text was considered separately and on its own terms with the goal of developing an interpretive understanding of the authors' view. Specifically, I conducted multiple readings of these texts to examine theoretical and normative statements forming the basis of their respective positions. After extracting statements conveying Rhee and Ravitch's views on education in general, I employed a coding technique to identify passages corresponding to four areas of investigation: status quo, function, equality and quality.

The reference to a status quo refers to a particular state of affairs reformers often presume requires changing, which in itself implies another state of affairs that is deemed more desirable. Function refers to how the school system operates and the outcomes it produces. Here again reformers often take a pessimistic view in that school systems are said to be pathological owing to the fact they produce (or help to

produce) inequality. Any reference in the text to notions of equality or the educational quality was marked for further analysis.

Passages either directly or indirectly referred to these four categories; however, in order to give indirect passages full consideration it must have also included an explicit reference to the principal of under investigation. For example, Ravitch may not state directly what constitutes the status quo for her but she may provide clues as to what she might mean by such a thing when she speaks about the deep-seated and widespread influence of corporate America. In this case she is explicit in her characterization even if it is not directly stated. Anything implied in these passages offer clues into other areas of investigations and provide guidance for subsequent readings. Thus, while I am only mentioning four categories here, there are subsequent ones of equal and/or lesser importance depending what they reveal about the author's overall position.

My initial codes are derived from what I have discerned from the literature and provided considerable direction to my reading of Ravitch and Rhee. This approach enabled me to handle a considerable amount of text more effectively. All the codes used here are axial in the sense they are meant to establish relationships and patterns both between the texts and the discourse. The literature reviewed above, like Rhee and Ravitch, is a sample of the education reform discourse meant to reflect some of the popular topics, perspectives and positions taken in the debate.

These things influenced how I moved between coding and memoing.<sup>2</sup> With the prospect of additional categories beyond the four initial ones things can become far more complex. To help alleviate the complexity, I needed to maintain a distinction between contextual and discursive comparisons. In the former instance, the text is compared with itself in an effort to develop an interpretive understanding of the position on its terms. The latter, discursive comparison helps me define areas of mutual communication or correspondence. In practice both these things are operative since any reading is inherently influenced by factors outside the text and the text itself commands a certain level of attention to the language it uses. Nevertheless, the technique employed here is meant to train myself into a focused theoretical reading meant to remove elements unrelated to the inquiry. We should be less concerned with what Ravitch and Rhee say about their positions and more about what is expressed as they articulate their respective positions. Ironically, Rhee labels herself a political agnostic on matters of education but there is more than a little liberalism (and others would argue conservatism) in her text. Specifically, it is expressed in her commitment to equal opportunity however hollow it might appear to her critics (namely Ravitch). To illuminate the significance of ideological expressions such as these, it is necessary for us to analyze lapses or jumps in reasoning in their arguments. The point is not to expose logical fallacies or inconsistencies, but to grasp what they take-for-granted as they reason through their positions. In other words, it is necessary to apprehend what they overlook that

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<sup>2</sup> Memoing refers to the practice of recording lessons and themes learned from text.

they should in fact see given their perspectives and views but unfortunately do not. I term these events ideological movements and I went on to use them as supports for an inquiry into the commonalities between Ravitch and Rhee.

The discursive approach employed here draws from Louis Althusser's philosophical treatment of Karl Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1990). The methods described above exemplify the kind of critical reading Althusser describes when presenting Marx's review of fellow political economic theorists. Just as Marx read Adam Smith and David Ricardo through the historical materialist lens he and Engels spent years cultivating, I describe a method by which to read Ravitch and Rhee through the lens of critical theory. In other words, critical theory provides the standard by which Ravitch and Rhee's ideas are classified and labeled. However, this work is distinguished from those above both in terms of the problem addressed and methodological approach.

To be sure, I problematize Right/Left classifications and seek clarification on progressivism in American education reform. Critical readings of debate representatives have revealed Rightist and Leftist tendencies; however, the classification of progressivist ideals remains a contested point within the literature and the overlaps between competing positions is not sufficiently addressed. A symptomatic reading allows for an in-depth, critical interrogation of the contemporary reform discourse not found in the reviewed works. Moving beyond the comparison between dominant, Rightist reform discourses and a critical, Leftist

ones, a symptomatic reading discloses oversights within a text that ultimately lie within its field of vision. Althusser writes, a symptomatic reading:

... divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of two texts, and the measure of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one's is the fact that in the new one the second text is articulated with the lapses in the first text. (p. 25)

As samples of the American education reform discourse, *Radical* and *Reign of Error* are eventually taken as one text. This way we can examine overlaps and convergences between them. By rearticulating it (the 'text') with absences and lapses, as Althusser describes, we gain an understanding of the ideological contents within the reform discourse and are better positioned to investigate the conceptual utility of Right/Left classifications.

## THE SYSTEM (AS THEY SEE IT)

Moving between *Reign of Error* and *Radical*, the text oscillates between a narrower criticism of American schools and a broader critique of American society; however, Rhee's pragmatic outlook lends itself to base claims on observables rather than the high theoretical abstractions Ravitch is forced to use in her counterarguments. For example, Rhee emphasizes schooling while downplaying the impact of poverty, racism and other socioeconomic factors when discussing poverty while Ravitch conceives these as social, as opposed to a school, problems. This discussion reveals absences in the text as well as a shared orientation to the question of labor and organization.

The arguments advanced by Ravitch appear to be far more sophisticated and attempts to grapple with the inherent complexities of American education reform. Rhee presents the issue as a matter of fact – to improve schools, improve the quality of instruction – while Ravitch obliges us to think a bit more critically about what it would mean to change the nation's school system. Reading *Reign of Error*, it is far more difficult to think of uplifting the teaching profession solely in terms of recruiting talented, committed teachers and terminating those who underperform as Rhee reiterates often. Despite disparities in their level of sophistication both



analyses struggle within the confines of the same theoretical argument found within the American reform discourse – ‘the system yields unequal outcomes.’

The subject of this argument is the part to which we must direct our attention; however, the predicate requires some explanation. First, it should be noted that it refers to the inequalities observers find unacceptable and in need of immediate attention. Readers might recall Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1991), a landmark investigation into the conditions inner city students face while expected to compete with their more privileged counterparts in more affluent school districts. *Radical* harnesses the emotions of those offended by these realities and gives those feelings direction. Rhee dismisses any notion that such realities factor into a child’s ability to attain a quality education in what eventually amounts to rearticulating of the American Dream narrative where anyone, from any walk of life can succeed as well as the idea of education as being the ‘Great Equalizer:’

The national studies proved my case: it was not just the poverty or drugs or broken families or violence that made it hard to teach kids... To paraphrase Clinton adviser James Carville: It was the schools, stupid. And the mind-set. (pg. 112-113)

If it was not clear to readers, Rhee references an admired political advisor to emphasize that the problem with American education is the schools.

As demonstrated in the previous section, *Reign of Error* reduces the burden on schools to address poverty and segregation, framing these as social problems rather than school ones. Subtracting the ‘Great Equalizer’ idea from the narrative,

Ravitch vastly lifts the level of the debate but in doing so she finds herself oriented in a similar direction as her opponents. This brings us to the subject - the system.

Both Rhee and Ravitch reference two separate states of affairs – one that in their mind exists as real and another that is being pursued (i.e. not in existence). With reference to the real existing state, Ravitch sees a public education system under assault by corporate interests in the first instance while Rhee sees a system weakened by entrenched interests and longstanding organizational practices. With reference to the one being pursued, Ravitch aspires to a system of checks and balances bolstered by education professionals enjoying significant autonomy while Rhee hopes for one that holds teachers accountable. These reform visions include some conception of a system that is either functioning pathologically (in the case of Rhee) or under assault (in the case of Ravitch).

In the former case, the discussion of American education is ultimately narrowed to a discussion about teaching where teachers are expected to assume the responsibility of responsibility of improving educational outcomes and thus contribute to the goal of addressing inequality. Other roles included in this system are school administrators, responsible for providing teacher resources, and school officials, those overseeing the hiring, retention and termination of staff. This conception appears to be both sensible and makes it relatively simple to diagnose problems should they arise.

Looking externally, to elements outside the school proper, Rhee would also have us look at this within the context of national security. Recalling a speech given

by the prime minister of Singapore she points to his reasoning regarding the country's competitiveness in the global economy:

When the topic turned to competing in the global economy, he chose to discuss education. He said that when his country set its sights on entering the global market and winning its share, it decided it must first create a strong education system. If its children were not prepared to compete, how could Singapore hope to gain a foothold against the United States, Germany, or China? The country made sure to establish a first-class education system that was linked to the financial and commercial sectors. Seems obvious: invest in education and you ensure a strong workforce and vibrant economy. But in the United States we see education as a social issue, rather than an economic one. When budgets get cut at federal, state, and local levels, education often falls first under the ax. That, too, must change if we hope to compete. (Rhee 2013:xi)

She is selective in the relationships she chooses to highlight, preferring to downplay arguments about the negative impact of social factors on education and playing up the latter's relationship with the economy in general.

In *Radical*, the school system produces outputs in the form of productive labor to serve as inputs to a presumed economic system. Conversely, she alludes to an additional problem concerning the budget shortages currently afflicting America's education system. Terms such as 'social' and 'economic' are not precisely defined but these statements provide some glimpse into what Rhee means by them. Particularly, she tends to think of the 'economic' in terms of 'money', 'labor', 'consumption' and 'production'. On the other hand, the 'social' is typically thought of in terms of 'class', 'race', and 'ethnicity'. It is the latter social dimension that those sharing Rhee's perspective wish to omit from the discussion. *Radical* conceives American education isolated from social realities while being necessarily connected

to economic ones. This connection is necessary on account that education supports a healthy economy, which in turn ensures the overall survival of the nation.

Ravitch, brings the social dimension back to the debate and asserts forcefully that teachers can no more be blamed for socioeconomic differences than they can for its effects on education. She references philosopher and sociologist, W.E.B. Dubois to support her claim that society and social problems should not be neglected from the conversation:

W.E.B. DuBois said during the depths of the Great Depression that “no school, as such, can organize industry, or settle the matter of wage and income, can found homes or furnish parents, can establish justice or make a civilized world.” DuBois was not “making excuses.” He was placing the blame for poverty and inequality where it belongs: on the shoulders of those who control industry and government.

Dubois recognized that schools alone cannot create equality or eliminate poverty. They can help highly motivated students escape poverty. Many thousands of personal stories attest to the power of one teacher, one principal, one school, that saved a student from his or her parent’ life of hardship. Educators and schools do have remarkable power to change lives. (Ravitch 2014:224)

According to Ravitch, schools are precluded from actually educating students on account of social realities beyond their immediate control. As a result, education is necessarily connected to the social world if only because the latter conditions the former’s ability to function appropriately. If we accept Ravitch’s argument then Rhee’s diagnosis of the school systems pathological function is off the mark precisely because she fails to understand its limitations.

The social and economic factors external to the school system proper constitute the conditional forces. The school system is no better positioned to

transform them than an individual can change the temperature in a room by adjusting the thermostat – there is only but so much they can do to significantly change outcomes. Just as the room temperature is conditioned by weather conditions and the strength of the heating/cooling system, so to is the education system conditioned by social and economic conditions. This is the argument Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis wished to emphasize in *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

Rarticulating the premiere economic found in the discourse using Rhee and Ravitch we get the following: The [school/social] system yields inequality. While not taking the same position, present the same kind of argument. The concepts employed remain arbitrarily defined and without sufficient grounding in the facts. Admittedly, Ravitch moves the text farther along in this respect; however, she is still hampered by an orientation rendering her incapable of transcending the very ideologies she blames for undermining American education.

Unlike Kumashiro, Ravitch traces the ideological predecessors of so-called Rightist reform agendas:

The corporate reform movement has its roots in an ideology that is antagonistic to public education. Partisans on the far right long ago turned against public schools, which they call “government schools.” As a matter of ideology, they do not believe that government can do anything right. From the time that the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman introduced the idea of vouchers in 1955, his supporters embraced vouchers as the best school reform ever, because it would enable parents to take government money to a school of their choice, including private and religious schools. Voucher advocates have long argued that the money should follow the child to whatever institution the family chooses, be it public, private, or religious. For years, they made the seductive pitch that parents should be “free to choose” (as Friedman put it) and that government should supply each family its share of the money and get out of the way. But for many years

after the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954, the idea of school choice was tainted because segregationists used it to evade desegregation in districts facing court-ordered desegregation. (Ravitch 2014:20)

Ravitch steers the debate onto more ideologically friendly terrain taking care to expose the corporate character of contemporary reform agendas. She highlights how reform efforts have much in common with a theoretical tradition that has been historically hostile to government administration of public goods and services. Later, she comments on how free-market and pro-choice advocates rely on misguided assumptions that very rarely lead to the promised equal opportunities advertised:

The free market works well in producing goods and services, but it produces extreme inequality, and it has a high rate of failure. That is not the way we want our schools to work. The core principle of American public education is supposed to be equality of educational opportunity, not a race to the top or a free market of choices with winners and losers. Our goal as a society, which we have never achieved, is to provide an education of equal quality to every child so that each of them has an equal chance to succeed in the world. The business model of choice and competition, testing and accountability, moves us even further away from that goal; as communities dissolve, students and families sort themselves into schools that reflect differences in race, ethnicity, and class. As communities and schools become more segregated, they become more, not less, inequitable. The goal of equality of educational opportunity is impossible to achieve to the extent that we remain in thrall to standardized testing, which calculates the gaps among different groups but does nothing to close them. (Ravitch 2014:304)

Ravitch then would like to differentiate her views from the kind of libertarian and neoliberal ideologies she believes reformers have adopted by defending the role of government and public governance as a check on the inequities produced by free market processes. Amidst all the talk about the economy, she would have us entertain the question of the State and the need to ensure that citizens are capable

of acting in accordance with democratic principles. Drawing from the educational philosophy of John Dewey, Ravitch believes public schooling is intimately tied to democracy.

Crucial to her defense of the democratic state and public education is an insistence on the autonomy of education professionals and an implicit trust that they will act with a sense of civic and professional responsibility. Embedded in this autonomous association of professionals we might say exists a kind of devotion to the development and advancement of group knowledge and expertise. Ravitch alludes to an example of such an ethical outlook when she alludes to some of the original ideas behind the charter school movement:

The charter movement began with high hopes in the early 1990s. Charter schools were supposed to enroll the neediest students. But in the era of NCLB, it was dangerous to enroll the students who had a hard time sitting still, those with disabilities, and those who couldn't speak or read English. They might pull down the school's test scores. Few charters want the students for whom charters were first invented.

Charters were supposed to be laboratories for bold innovations, but the most successful charters follow a formula of "no excuses": strict discipline, eyes on the teacher, walk in a straight line, no deviation from rigid rules and routines. Some of the most successful charters seem determined to reinvent the schoolhouse of a century ago. (Ravitch 2014:178)

Today charter schools operate more like competitors to traditional public schools; however, there is something more to these statements that may help us also understand Ravitch's position. For Ravitch, education is taken as a vocation unto itself with its own set of methods and skills as well as its own set of goals and objectives. This latter idea is expressed elsewhere in the text the significance of which is covered later; nevertheless, it is important to note here that Ravitch

differentiates herself from the more utilitarian view of education, which conceives it as a thing-for-another (namely the economy) as opposed to a thing-in-itself.<sup>3</sup>

Both works depict American schools as being in a state of crisis and in need of policy solutions geared toward improving the education profession. *Radical* argues school culture and the quality of education combine to frustrate superintendents and fail students. The text reflects on her experiences as an educator, teacher recruiter and school district official to provide evidence to this fact and to depict accountability as a necessary aspect of any serious education policy agenda. *Reign of Error* contends that the repeated attacks on educators, schools and the principle of public education have demoralized teachers and undermined public schooling. Using empirical research findings and drawing from progressive era philosophical ideals, the text reads as an informed criticism of popular school reform policies and a reaffirmation of liberal democratic principles.

Written as half memoir, half policy agenda, Rhee's *Radical* is filled with various accounts of systemic shortcomings and stories illustrating the need for employing professional, skilled and committed persons to fill classrooms and administrative offices. Recalling her time as a teacher in Baltimore public schools:

I was outraged at the condition of the school, the low expectations for the students, and the poor quality of education in some of the classrooms... I knew I could stay in Baltimore and have an impact on this group of kids, but I began to believe that public policy had to change: how we run schools and

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<sup>3</sup> As a thing-in-itself, Ravitch would have us believe it to possess an inherent value independent from its economic function. Later we will see that she borrows from Dewey the idea that education should work to nurture productive members of a democratic society to be one of its highest purposes germane to it.



select our teachers, how we train them, how they relate to the students— so much had to change for all kids who look like my kids to have an equal shake in life. (Rhee 2013:54)

Elsewhere, these various organizational attributes become subsumed under the term the ‘culture of the school system (pg. 112-113).’ It is important to note that when Rhee refers to the ‘school system’ or the ‘culture of the school system’ she means a set of institutional practices and general orientations. In her mind these things require changing before educational equality can be realized.

According to her, the school system functions pathologically insofar as mediocrity and complacency is allowed to persist. Interestingly, she argues that the system’s effectiveness centers on its ability to select, train and retain high performing teachers. In short, running schools amounts to recruiting labor power capable of producing desired results. In other words, recruiting teachers and principals capable of improving student test scores and increasing the level of academic achievement in schools.

The idea of schooling as being reduced to teaching/instruction and the reproduction of teachers/instructors illustrates Rhee’s view regarding education in America. She exploits the contemporary anti-establishment sentiments and depicts today’s educational institutions as representing union, political and ‘other established’ interests. Corrupt and ineffective, Rhee contends these groups are responsible for perpetuating mediocrity and being too lenient on low performance. The underlying theoretical dimensions within her argument are depicted in her Widget Effect analogy:

The culture in education is what TNTP refers to as the Widget Effect, meaning that teachers are treated as if they are interchangeable widgets, as if they are all the same. Everybody gets tenure. Everybody gets a good evaluation.

That culture does not actually help the profession. It certainly does not help students. The reality is that teachers are not interchangeable widgets, not even close. The differences that highly effective teachers have on kids are massive. (Rhee 2013:142)

The Widget Effect is a criticism she and her colleagues at The New Teacher Project (TNTP) used to make an argument about the administration and management of the teaching profession in public school districts. It is used to criticize certain policies such as tenure, compensation plans and evaluation procedures/standards that she feels encourage and compel teachers to shirk their responsibility to students. She essentially argues that there is little to no incentive for teachers to improve and no accountability measures in place to enable administrators to make sensible decisions regarding teacher employment.

The Widget Effect enables her to convey an employment situation that is in some sense inefficient and unproductive. The analogy conveniently restates Hess' opposition to existing educational practice where he draws comparisons between them and Fordist, factory management practices. It is not an analytic tool capable of disclosing something salient about the teaching profession, rather it is a rhetorical device meant to move the discussion on more favorable grounds.

Juxtapose this rhetorical device with her statements on the relationship between poverty and schooling. According to her, it matters little whether students come from a 'filthy apartment' or a 'posh mansion' so long as they have a good

teacher in their classroom. By her logic then, students may be treated as interchangeable widgets but not teachers. The contradiction in her argument makes sense when we consider that in Rhee's mind, teachers are inputs in the education process and are expected to produce certain outcomes measured mostly in terms of statistical indicators. Students too are a part of this process but they are conceived as raw materials rife with all kinds of 'waste' that must be gradually exorcised. Correcting the system then is mostly a matter of ensuring this process operates as smoothly and efficiently as possible by constantly supplying it labor capable of achieving results.

Rhee's analogy does well to direct our attention to a crucial theoretical observation that she neglects for want to reinforce her particular position. That teachers, for managerial purposes, should not be treated as interchangeable widgets is evidenced by the fact that what is being employed are not teachers but their capacity for work (i.e. labor power). Unfortunately, she sees this without actually seeing it. In her view, we should reform education to mitigate the unavoidable problem of competing group/individual interests and asymmetric information to diminish the threat of ineffective, self-interested workers and opportunism. The fact that teachers are capable of shirking their responsibility reflects the managerial problem of employing an individual's capacity for work. For Rhee, the problem is reorganizing educational institutions such that they increase competition, accountability and oversight as a check to these undesirable, yet unavoidable, behaviors.

Rhee devotes considerable time simplifying complex issues into terms allowing for an immediate description from a school management/administration perspective. The personal anecdotes and thin social/historical accounts of the educational environment for low-income children plays to American sensibilities regarding equality and practicality:

There was no pretending that D.C. schoolchildren weren't in dire straits. Low-income black children in the fourth grade scored the worst in the country on federal reading tests. Eighty-eight percent of eighth graders scored below proficiency in English. In the nationwide report card—the National Assessment of Educational Progress—children that I would be responsible for were scoring far worse than their counterparts in other cities. Their performance was the worst in the country. Most people blamed poverty for the low academic achievement levels of the children in D.C. They were wrong. The federal report card showed that poor African American students in New York City were two grade levels ahead of the poor black kids in Washington, D.C. On average, fourth- and eighth-grade students in the District of Columbia were about a year behind students in similar straits nationwide, in cities such as Houston and Boston. There is no doubt that poverty and home environment have an impact on students and schools, but clearly there was something terribly wrong with D.C. schools. (Rhee 2013:112)

Researchers might wonder whether the differences between Washington, Houston and Boston are statistically significant and thus require further explanation as to why students from Washington performed lower than students from cities with similar demographics. For Rhee however the matter is already settled. In her mind, non-school factors such as 'poverty' and 'home environment' do not explain the entire picture. The fact that students from Washington were even further behind students in other cities who face similar circumstances proved that there is something else explaining educational differences.

Rhee believes herself to be skilled at deciphering contradictory research findings and disclosing the reality of a given situation. She talks of the need to “never take numbers at face value, to always dig in and analyze to see what’s really happening” when faced with competing conclusions from academics working with the same data set and the very real possibility of data manipulation (Rhee 2013:64). However, it is equally important to consider the questions and problems guiding the research for they help to guide the research and ultimately the conclusions drawn from it. In reality, Rhee is adept at framing the problems and articulating questions that lend themselves to the kinds of conclusions and solutions she prefers and deems necessary.

Her critical assessment of the data only strengthened her conviction that schooling and teaching are two significant factors in determining educational outcomes. Ironically, Rhee provides ample anecdotal and historical evidence throughout the text to illustrate the weaknesses of this argument. Nevertheless, it succeeds in making the point about the importance of teachers and schools and also frames an otherwise complex discussion in immediate, simplistic terms:

When it comes to making laws and policies in the best interests of educating children, our political system is too often stuck, paralyzed, and dysfunctional. The political parties are locked in opposing positions. There’s little compromise. Republicans are often slavishly devoted to free market principles and their ideals around policies like gun laws. Democrats are often captive to the dogma of the leaders of the teachers unions. Neither consistently puts students first. We have to show politicians and their constituents that there’s an alternative to the current gridlock. (Rhee 2013:246)

Adding to the simplification of the issue is that the solutions are articulated within the stated problems. Narrowing the discussion of American education to schooling and then again to teaching allows her to introduce the subject of accountability insofar as it can be shown differences in teachers account for differences in educational outcomes. Likewise, narrowing the discussion of politics to achieving compromise allows her to take a morally superior standpoint by suggesting we put students ahead of our own interests – that we make students interests the major part of our agenda as if this is not a contestable issue.

*Radical* offers a solution in the exact moment it frames the problem. The culture of the school system with its complacency in dealing with low teacher performance and inefficient recruiting practices must be countered with greater accountability measures and policies that ensure good teachers and principals are employed. Ravitch's own views on American schools contrasts sharply with this. In many ways, *Reign of Error* is a reaction against this managerial viewpoint pleading with readers to expand their view of the issues and consult expert research to resist the rhetorical appeal of contemporary reform positions such as Rhee's.

*Reign of Error* uses historical justifications and statistical facts to challenge widely held assumptions about key issues in the reform debate while advancing an alternative approach to improving education in America. For Ravitch, today's reform movement runs counter to what we know about education and only perpetuates attacks on public sector management as well as the teaching profession. Rather than pursue a path toward privatization and punitive teaching conditions, *Reign of Error*

draws from Progressive Era ideas to articulate a more democratic vision of the education system predicated on the professional autonomy of teachers.

Ravitch agrees with the sentiment that change is needed but stops short of crisis talk linking America's education woes to deficiencies in how teachers are selected, trained and subsequently evaluated:

That the schools are in crisis because of persistent, orchestrated attacks on them and their teachers and principals, and attacks on the very principle of public responsibility for public education. These attacks create a false sense of crisis and serve the interests of those who want to privatize the public schools. (pg. xi)

Against the market based, pro-choice reforms dominating the pro-reform narrative, she argues that a system of checks and balances is our best hope of an education system that works for all. For Ravitch, the fundamentals of the American education system are sound but require some alterations to help mitigate inefficiencies and better produce equality among social groups. Greater professional autonomy for educators is one change she feels will enable teachers to practice their craft in a manner that will transform education in America.

Contending that American education has made great strides in the past toward closing the achievement gap, she shows a keen awareness of the connection between education and societal issues:

Poverty is not an excuse. It is a harsh reality. No one wants poverty to be any child's destiny. Public schools exist to give all children equal educational opportunity, no matter what their zip code.

Schools fail when they lack the resources to provide equal educational opportunity. And they fail not because of lack of will but because poverty often overwhelms the best of intentions.

Poverty persists not because schools are bad and teachers don't care but because society neglects its root causes. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are social problems, not school problems. Schools don't cause poverty and racial segregation, nor can schools solve these problems on their own. (Ravitch 2014:224)

Elsewhere Ravitch takes issue with how reform has politicized these topics and as a result distorted these relationships in an effort to exploit public sentiments surrounding it. In "How to Demoralize Teachers" (2012) she criticizes then New York Governor Cuomo for what she views as his unapologetic manipulation of testing standards to push through a performance-pay policy into a collective bargaining dispute. For this reason, Ravitch would have us protect education from such political influences.

*Reign of Error* makes a similar argument regarding tenure and the veiled attacks on teachers but is less stringent in its call to isolate education from politics perhaps because Ravitch now recognizes the inherent political nature of her educational philosophy. In point of fact, thinking education to be a site of a free exchange of ideas and a means to create democratic citizens as she does is fundamental to the notion of a liberal education. Indeed, the politics of schooling in America has created a very complex terrain where progressives and liberals like Ravitch find themselves at odds:

Far from being progressive, these changes strike at the heart of one of our nation's most valued institution. Liberals, progressives, well-meaning people have lent their support to a project that is antithetical to liberalism and progressivism. By supporting market-based "reforms," they have allied themselves with those who seek to destroy public education. They are being used by those who have an implacable hostility toward the public sector. The transfer of public funds to private management and the creation of



thousands of deregulated, unsupervised, and unaccountable schools have opened the public coffers to profiteering, fraud, and exploitation by large and small entrepreneurs. (Ravitch 2014:4)

Here Ravitch attempts to appeal to the current discontent with corporate and business interests in America who she believes representative of a status quo. Interestingly, she seems to think readers will somehow feel uneasy about the 'transfer of public funds to private management:'

...If the American public understood that the very concept of education was being disfigured into a mechanism to apply standardized testing and sort their children into data points on a normal curve, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If the American public understood that their children's teachers will be judged by the same test scores that label their children as worthy or unworthy, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If the American public knew how inaccurate and unreliable these methods are, both for children and for teachers, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform and that is why the reform message must be rebranded to make it palatable to the public. (Ravitch 2014:35-36)

Ravitch's narrative mimics what we find in Kumashiro in that it lays the blame on the current brand of reform, rather than education proper, as well as the public's inability to see through the former's seductive, manipulative tactics.

In *Reign of Error*, the crisis in American schooling equates to the systematic contemporary reform efforts continue undermining them with standardized testing, market-based measures and punitive working conditions. Its objective is to warn the public of these misguided attempts and reverse course before any further damage is done. On the other hand, *Radical* contends that differences in educational outcomes already illustrate the dire state of American schooling and that aggressive action, such as those Ravitch argues against, are needed to bring about necessary

change. The disagreement is over the strategies and tactics used to address education inequalities.

## A PROBLEM OF ORDER

After criticizing the motives, effectiveness and expertise of popular reform measures and those advocating Ravitch offers the following solution: 'democratic federalism and professional autonomy are required in order to improve the school system.' This contrasts with what we find in Rhee, 'business administration and professional accountability are required in order to improve the school system.' In both however, the issue centers on a question of organization and labor in what resembles a Hobbesian problem of order. In their pursuit of an egalitarian order, these questions arise as parts of the problem as well as the solution.

What is striking about *Reign of Error* is the great confidence Ravitch exhibits in the teaching profession's ability to govern itself and deliver a high quality education to the public provided it is allowed and enabled to do so. Against the assumption of a situation where individuals and groups act opportunistically and thus require strict accountability measures to coerce them into performing their duties effectively, Ravitch presumes the possibility of a professional association dedicated to the civic goal of providing quality education for all. Additionally, she does not assume all those involved in education agree or should agree on the directions it should take. In point of fact this is why she favors the kind of

democratic federalism she locates in the history of American education, where state and local authorities set curriculum and instruction standards.

In Ravitch's view, educators are unable to perform their role as educators because they are demoralized and burdened by conditions beyond their influence and control. Not only are they, and the recipients of their work (the public), being stripped of the responsibility of providing this service to all deserving members under the guise of reform, they also are tasked with shouldering an unfair burden of transforming society and uplifting the economy. Given these repressive conditions, meaningful reform amounts to increased autonomy and freedom for our professionals and publics:

A public school belongs to the public whose taxes built it and maintain it. It does not belong to the parents whose children are enrolled this year. Parents whose children are enrolled this year should not be given ownership of a school that belongs to the entire community and to future students and parents. Those who sign a petition this year may not even be parents in the school next year. Giving them the power to privatize public property is irresponsible. If the students in a public school have low test scores, it is the responsibility of those in charge of the district to evaluate the school and bring whatever changes are necessary to improve student performance. The district leadership is responsible for guaranteeing that every school has the resources and personnel it needs to provide a sound education. (Ravitch 2014:203)

In response to the repressive and constraining character of reform initiatives alongside baseless government intrusion, Ravitch calls for a halt to contemporary reform initiatives and a return to a practice of democratically organizing institutions to deliver a public service.

In Rhee's mind, past education policy failed to institute practices that protect the interests of students and instead are indicative of a status quo represented by politicians, unions and profiteers who have gained despite systemic failings. There is a presumption here that such groups and individuals will undoubtedly act opportunistically or in the interest of themselves. Interestingly, Rhee does not seem to hold any value judgment on the matter but appears to take it as a given reality of the current situation. She admits and even applauds those teachers willing to take up positions in some of the nations most troubled districts and schools. That said, altruism factors little into her vision of the American school system and does not necessarily yield desired performance outcomes. Faced with this reality, Rhee argues school administrators need to be able to train, terminate or replace failing teachers as well as implement procedures to ensure high performing teachers are recruited and retained empower.

Articulating an alternative version of the principal-agent problem we find in Rhee, where one party (the principal) must rely on another (the agent) to make decisions on his/her behalf, Ravitch's version of the problem is a bit more abstract. Because she does not address the issue from the standpoint of management/administration she takes for granted the fact that the teaching profession presupposes an employer in her view of things. By contrast, Rhee's entire position proceeds from this standpoint and her platform is an extension of the kinds of policies she presses for in labor disputes with teachers unions on the opposing side. Ravitch, may be aware of this fact but views the employer in general

theoretical terms, which for her amounts to a democratically organized public. In practice, she reveals this public to be an elected state and local authorities operating in the interests of a more general public. Both resolve the problem of interest misalignment germane to their respective depictions of existing state of affairs by advancing competing ideas as to how labor should be employed given their presumed propensity to act contrary to principal (administrators in the case of Rhee and 'the public' in the case of Ravitch).

Whereas Rhee moves from criticizing the current practice of employing teachers to advocating one allowing administrators greater powers of accountability, Ravitch moves from a critique of such punitive measures to promoting greater professional autonomy. These movements illustrate the problem as a one involving labor whereby the problem amounts to how can teachers be made more productive or how can we extract more labor-power from them. This much was explored in the previous discussion of Rhee's Widget Effect analogy; however, it could be raised when in discussing Ravitch's faith in the teaching profession and her believing it will work in a theoretical public interest.

Let us revisit this aspect of the problem from Rhee's position: 'educators and officials must act on behalf of constituents (namely students and parents) where divergent interests and asymmetric information combine to create a problematic situation.' Already in the formulation of the problem the solutions are apparent – create a situation where interests are aligned and information asymmetries are

reduced.<sup>4</sup> The problem not only necessitates a conception of self-interested, opportunistic actors as Rhee assumes but also presupposes the policy measures she deems practically necessary. To wit, Rhee favors standardized testing as a means to monitor productivity and arm administrators (and constituents) with greater information; merit-based compensation schemes to attract, motivate and retain potential and existing educators; mayoral control and charter school expansion to weaken the extent to which the interests of teachers (namely their unions) influence educational decisions; and removing tenure as a part of the collective bargaining process so that administrators are better equipped to remove ineffective teachers. For Ravitch the cure for corporate reform and privatization is democratic governance and public responsibility.

Both advance speculative solutions about the proper organization of educational institutions and contexts. We have already stated Rhee's penchant for organization based on mix of incentives (merit-based pay), competition (charter schools and vouchers) and strong centralized control (mayoral control). Ravitch opposes this with a more democratic vision:

If we believe in democracy, and if we believe that public schools must act in concert with the principles of democracy, then we must reject authoritarianism from any quarter, be it the mayor, the state education department, or the federal government. No one should exercise untrammelled control over education policy and have the power to ignore public opinion. The children belong to the parents, and the schools belong to the public, not

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<sup>4</sup> Ravitch alludes to Milton Friedman as the ideological inspiration for pro-reformers but Rhee's position is closer to Oliver Williamson work on capitalist economic institutions (See Williamson 1985).

to the mayor or the governor or the president. Public officials are elected to serve the public, not to control it. (Ravitch 2014:288)

To check the government's propensity to control constituents and exert unwarranted influence over public services and goods, Ravitch would have us look to federalism as a way to curb this behavior:

Education in this nation operates on the basis of federalism. Federalism refers to a system of shared power, a balance of power among local school boards, state authorities, and federal government. In this sharing of power, the federal government sets the basic ground rules protecting the civil rights of students but by law has no role in setting curriculum or instructional standards. Education is not mentioned in the Constitution. It has long been a state and local function. The states have primary responsibility for maintaining and funding public education. The federal government acts in a supportive role. It supplies about 10 percent of total funding; the states and localities provide the other 90 percent.

American education is a patchwork quilt, with responsibility for funding and managing education parceled out among the various jurisdictions. (pg. 279)

In Ravitch's vision, ownership and control is ultimately vested in public as opposed to private entities. Because education is a public good or service, Ravitch believes it must be organized democratically:

Despite its faults, the American system of democratically controlled schools has been the mainstay of our communities and the foundation for our nation's success. We must work together to improve our public schools. We must extend the promise of equal educational opportunity to all the children of our nation. Protecting our public schools against privatization and saving them for future generations of American children is the civil rights issue of our time. (Ravitch 2014:325)

Its important to note that despite its nomenclature public education by no means suggests public ownership or control. Ravitch understands this and endeavors to devise a blueprint for how we can at least approach this reality. Unfortunately, her



blueprint privileges organizational contexts over structural conditions. It requires that we focus on managing the various levels of government, just as Rhee 'manages' the various interests involved in education, before we even consider whether conditions favor the kind of cooperation within communities she deems necessary.

If she were to address structural constraints teacher confront as one of the premiere agents of reform, she would have to address their inability to mobilize resources other than their own labor power of course as a class toward autonomous ends. Debate participants like Rhee and Ravitch find themselves addressing issues of organization even after they make explicit the issue of agency and structural limitations. Specifically it is common to observe debates about the teaching profession or teachers without any reference to their employment condition. This oversight is not committed in ignorance or error; rather it is a manifestation of the ideological orientation shared by Rhee and Ravitch.

Recall, the basic problem arising out of both *Radical and Reign of Error* is 'the system yields unequal outcomes;' however, upon closer reading this argument is made differently in each text. Using immediate descriptions and anecdotal observations, the former's version of the problem focuses on school system attributes and functions. Conversely, the latter assigns the problems of inequality and poverty to the social realm. As a result, the arguments can be restated as follows 'the (school) system yields inequality' in the case of Rhee and 'the (social) system yields inequality' in the case of Ravitch.

Divulging the absences in the argument illustrates their differences; however, restating the base problem they both confront reveals similarities in their approach to question of labor as well as how they tend to think about the problem. On the one end, Rhee's conception of the 'school' is far too crude and simplistic to raise the discourse to the feature the employment condition of teachers even if her position offered room. On the other, Ravitch's concept of the 'social' lacks the kind of socio-historical context necessary to give it factual grounding. It essential operates as a placeholder for non-school factors. Neither concept possesses a particular affinity to the question of labor and though they are related to one another as well as other concepts they are far from being dialectical constructs.

The text operationalizes these and other conceptions in order to advance the views and positions of the authors. Take for example this statement by Ravitch using the concept of the 'free market:'

The free market works well in producing goods and services, but it produces extreme inequality, and it has a high rate of failure. That is not the way we want our schools to work. The core principle of American public education is supposed to be equality of educational opportunity, not a race to the top or a free market of choices with winners and losers. Our goal as a society, which we have never achieved, is to provide an education of equal quality to every child so that each of them has an equal chance to succeed in the world. The business model of choice and competition, testing and accountability, moves us even further away from that goal; as communities dissolve, students and families sort themselves into schools that reflect differences in race, ethnicity, and class. As communities and schools become more segregated, they become more, not less, inequitable. The goal of equality of educational opportunity is impossible to achieve to the extent that we remain in thrall to standardized testing, which calculates the gaps among different groups but does nothing to close them. (Ravitch 2014:304)

Contrary to what Ravitch claims, the 'free market' does not produce wealth inequalities rather inequality is a necessary outcome of a definitive set of relations that may include market activity. Under capitalism, where market activity is prevalent but never in a vacuum disconnected from societal and cultural phenomena, wealth inequality is a necessary condition insofar as labor power is bought and sold as with most other commodities. In short, the question of inequality, is it self a question of labor, which in turn is a question regarding commodity production therefore amounting to a series of inquiries into the nature of inequality within the context of capitalism. The difference between the arguments I articulate and Ravitch's (and ones Rhee tends to) is it does not take for granted the relationships involved in the inquiry.

While Rhee and Ravitch differ over the merits of public schooling in America and its customary system components such as local school boards, teacher's unions, parent groups, etc. there is some sense they agree that it should further equality in society as far as providing opportunity for all. Rhee would go further and argue it should produce equality on account that she denies any significant relationship between it and the economy and society other than its role in producing a strong labor force. Similarly, they agree there should also be rational organization of its component parts to provide added support for the coordination of educational activities either to reduce inequality, increase educational excellence or both. In this sense we characterize both their positions as egalitarian owing to the normative ideal articulated in their respective works. The differences between them are

accounted for by the depth and breadth to which they give educational issues and topics.

With respect to the social and political direction of their respective outlook, both motivate changes that are similar in substance. The sphere of checks and balances or public accountability where the employment of labor-power takes place is how Ravitch and Rhee propose to reform/improve American education. Whereas Ravitch describes a kind of democratic federalism, Rhee offers a more populist approach:

One of the most common critiques you hear when you talk to union leaders about accountability is that teachers can't be held solely responsible for the achievement of their students. According to them, poverty and parental engagement are the key factors in whether a student can succeed in school. Notwithstanding that this argument presupposes that we should have no accountability to teach poor children, the parent argument is especially specious.

A perfect example of this is the new parent-trigger laws that are growing in popularity across the country. The first such law was passed in California and allows parents in failing schools to trigger, or force, the turnaround of that school if more than 50 percent of the parents sign a petition. The parents can then choose from a range of intervention options, which include replacing the staff, closing the school, or allowing a charter management organization to run the school. (Rhee 2013:xxx)

Juxtapose this statement with Ravitch's position on such laws and the logics behind them:

A public school belongs to the public whose taxes built it and maintain it. It does not belong to the parents whose children are enrolled this year. Parents whose children are enrolled this year should not be given ownership of a school that belongs to the entire community and to future students and parents. Those who sign a petition this year may not even be parents in the school next year. Giving them the power to privatize public property is irresponsible. If the students in a public school have low test scores, it is the responsibility of those in charge of the district to evaluate the school and

bring whatever changes are necessary to improve student performance. The district leadership is responsible for guaranteeing that every school has the resources and personnel it needs to provide a sound education (Ravitch 2014:203).

The theory of parent empowerment makes no sense. If the cure rate in a hospital were low, one would not expect the patients to seize control and fire the staff. The very idea of the parent trigger is an insult to the education profession and a pretense that turning the schools over to parents will solve problems that are not only educational but social and economic as well. There is a sort of Occupy Wall Street tone to the protesters who filled public parks in the summer of 2011. Occupy Wall Street was a ragtag group of demonstrators who demanded the kinds of redistributive policies that the parent trigger pretends to offer. The mayors closed down their tent cities with as much force as they thought necessary. Yet less than a year later, the mayors encouraged parents to “occupy” the public schools, an action likely to result in a transfer of public property to private charter chains. (Ravitch 2014:204)

Ravitch’s notion of an autonomous profession takes on a different character when we leave this democratic utopian sphere, which provides Ravitch with her idealism, Rhee with her pragmatism and both with the terms and standards by which to judge this imagined system of employed labor and bureaucratic authority. Whereas before educators are able to experiment and deploy their skills and labor to the development of the profession insofar as it serves public interests, now they find themselves struggling to find support (much less resources) for ideas and initiatives fashioned from countless years of training and experience. Where there was once a harmonious relationship between schoolteachers and district officials administering education accordingly, now there is a coexistence hopelessly maintained by an arbitrary commitment to an educational ideal and the threat of unemployment.

Ravitch attributes the demoralization of teachers to contemporary education reform when their class position, as employed labor, could be as much a cause. In

point of fact, when we consider closely their position as a labor employed in the service of education we see they are constrained by factors that have as much in common with corporate (capitalist) interests than the reforms she critiques. When we consider the fact that teachers depend on their skills to earn a livelihood we gain a better sense of the kind of leverage school districts have over teachers with or without a union. When we consider further their low access to resources and capital we gain a better sense of the opportunities for autonomous professional development available to Ravitch's demoralized workforce.

The professional autonomy advocated by Ravitch comes with the precondition of employment in the interest of another. The public character of education by no means implies it functions for the public good. Even if educational institutions are organized in accordance with a federalist system of checks and balances, it does not follow that this will generate a democratic order in education. The inequities she believes produced by the so-called free market as well as gaps in education also generate differences in power and influence. It is probably safe to assume that the bureaucratic organization she envisions will function to produce its own repressive mechanisms similar in kind to those Rhee maligns for being corrupt and self-serving. The reasoning for this has less to do with some innate human deficiency and more to do with the structure of the relationship.

In addition viewing labor (i.e. teaching) as an essential aspect of any effort to reform the American school system, Rhee and Ravitch overlook social structural conditions in which laborers act. While *Radical* never obliges its readers to look at

this with respect to teaching and teachers, it continuously makes the case that concrete institutional structures constrain administrators from taking certain actions – reform efforts need to address these in order to address education inequality. Ravitch correctly notes that Rhee misplaces the blame for education inequality on schools when in fact it is a social problem. Unfortunately, this movement only begins to move the text in the proper direction.

Moving from ‘the school system yields unequal outcomes’ to ‘the social system yields unequal outcomes’ broadens our analysis but does not focus it any better. To wit, both Ravitch and Rhee tend to depict the social realms as a hodgepodge of relationships related to issues of race, class, gender, among other things. The text as a whole moves hopelessly between high abstract idealism and a reductionist pragmatism where readers struggle with the dilemma of realizing equality within an inherently unequal society.

## THINKING CRITICALLY AND CONCEPTUALLY

Ravitch and Rhee represent two versions of liberalism that share an orientation to the question of labor and organization while struggling with the contradictory aim of realizing equality in capitalist America. The orientation is defined by what it does see as much as what it does not. After interrogating them separately, this study treated Ravitch's *Reign of Error* and Rhee's *Radical* as a single text representative of the debate about school reform in America. Within their collective field of sight is an argument about capitalism, yet they only allude to it with passing references to corporate interests, bureaucratic inertia and the free market even as they grapple with the question of inequality. None of which should be equated with capitalism; however, its absence tells much about how they approach the topic and issue at hand.

Furthermore, those categories prevent us from seeing Rhee and Rhee both as struggling within the confines of the same liberal tradition. The Hobbesian problem of order embedded in the text provided great insight into how both sought to address the issue of inequality. Rhee believes it necessary to coerce educators into improving their performance and becoming more productive while Ravitch assumed they would be motivated by a professional ethic to improve educational practice.



The overlap in their respective positions can be found less in their commitment to equality and more to do with textual oversights. It is unclear how Left and Right could be used to help us understand this as these positions probably would have forced us to categorize them as polar opposites – Ravitch as Left, Rhee as Right – and the interplay of their ideas would have been continue to go understated and overlooked. That they both propose to reform American schools by reorganizing its institutions and reorganizing its labor force is indicative of a shared orientation.

Ravitch may believe she has distanced herself from the punitive reform measures proposed by Rhee and contemporary reform proponents. However, doing so may not be as easy she believes. While it is true she manages to articulate a brand of reform different what we find in Rhee, one would be mistaken to champion it as defending teacher interests as she sometimes appears to suggest. The reality is that insofar as it stops short of empowering teachers and publics to exercise collective ownership and control, it is unlikely that the autonomy and freedom to practice education will be a defining feature of the school system.

The base argument in the text helps us show the inadequacies of Left/Right characterizations. If we take seriously their egalitarian claims in light of the fact they arrive at conclusions that are in essence not egalitarian, it is clear we must adopt more useful categories. The left/right dichotomy does not simply occlude our understanding of contemporary reform ideas; it precludes critical educators from articulating radical alternatives. While Ravitch and Rhee both may think of

themselves as suggesting alternatives to the status quo and working toward equality, the terms they rely upon prevent them from diagnosing the problem. The 'system' yields inequality on account of its capitalist nature.

Unpacking Ravitch's 'social' and critically examining the Rhee's 'school,' the question of labor illustrates a shared orientation that takes for granted the very existence of capitalism and its relations. Those relations are seen as immutable and unchanging in their respective proposals. They are in a sense legitimated and construed as necessary to address inequality. The two, capitalism and equality exist uncomfortably within the text as it expresses a motivation to undo inequalities within the school system by exploiting the unequal distribution of power and wealth inherent in the school system. Contradictions aside, on what side of the Left/Right continuum does such an orientation lie?

The theories articulated by critical educationalists indicate such terms are not particularly useful to their social justice project, which includes a commitment to equality and a need to address structured inequalities. Interestingly, Apple's critique of education in America and subsequent attempts to propose radical alternatives include only a halfhearted analysis of capitalism. Whereas, *Radical* and *Reign of Error* omit capitalism as a factor altogether, Apple (2004) introduces the concept but fails to provide an explanation for its inclusion. So long as it remains unpacked he is no better positioned to articulate an alternative to market based, top-down reform policies than Ravitch precisely because it lacks an important component.

Apple, like Ravitch and other democratic critiques, laments the loss of a past where “the common ground of the school no longer is based on a set of democratic political commitments” and citizens were political beings with “reciprocal rights and duties.” Within the logic of liberalism it is understandable why these things are underscored as being grave losses. But the critique extends beyond basing schooling on a set of democratic political commitments especially when they deflect from the undemocratic nature of how schools are organized. When neo-liberal reformers reduce teachers to inputs in the school system and publics to consumers they give expression to structural relations underlying organizational contexts. To wish for the return of democratic commitments without cultivating sufficiently democratic structures is an act as idealistic and romantic as the conservative (or neo-liberal) views Apple and Ravitch criticize.

Critical educationalists would benefit greatly from doing a better job at incorporating capitalism into their respective critiques of the ideologies surrounding education debate. Apple’s reluctance to unpack this “fractions of capital” term is forgivable given the fact that many attempts to explore relations between capitalism and ideology result in the kind of reductionism he wishes to avoid. In point of fact, his larger scholarly project is marked by a determination to base theoretical claims and visions in a materialist appraisal of the educational terrain. Rather than omit a key element of that terrain, Apple makes casual reference to capitalism as he introduces the major players within the education debate. Nevertheless, while his decision to name trends to marketize and

standardize educational institutions 'neoliberalism' is accurate, his choice to name four distinct political currents 'fractions of capital' remains inexplicable and arbitrary.

Critical educators may believe they have transcended liberalism, proclaiming instead to be guided by socialist principles and ideals. In fact, many of them find themselves incapable of breaking free of the various ideological trappings we find in Ravitch and Rhee. Taking for granted the question of labor and subsequent oversight of capitalism in arguments about school inequality, plagues many critical analyses and their own efforts to realize equality within a capitalist system. To be clear, addressing the question of labor and including an analysis of capitalism is not sufficient. Nevertheless, they would do well to incorporate these dialectically into analyses of education and social systems as a whole in order to overcome the aforementioned dilemma. Proposing so-called progressive reforms, such as Ravitch's professional autonomy and democratic federalism, introduces terms capable of formulating a critique of capitalism but the threat of being coopted and distorted by unfree and undemocratic forces such as neoliberalism remain.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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