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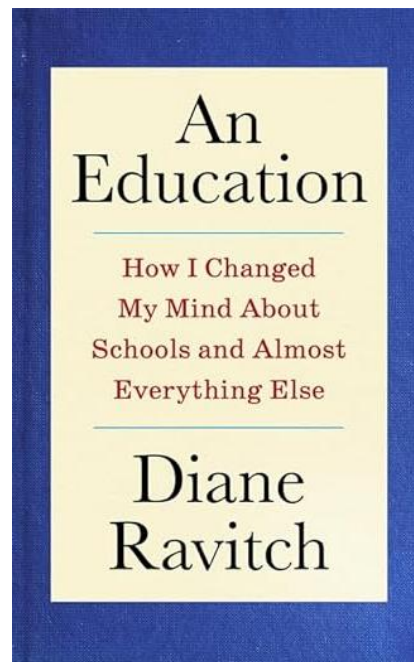
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An Education is a complicated book. We can actually think of it as two books. The first half is an at times interesting but largely uncritical account of Diane Ravitch's middle-class life up to the beginnings of her career as an influential author and member of conservative institutions and groups. It's an honest account but doesn't really connect Ravitch's biography to larger dynamics. A dose of biographical class analysis, one that is connected to a more serious discussion of the gendered realities that women such as Ravitch faced, would have helped.

The second half feels very different. It becomes a tale of her slow transition to a more educationally and socially critical orientation. As I'll point to later on, while this part of the volume is the more interesting and substantive part, it too could have benefitted from a clearer connection to critical traditions that actually provided the space for Ravitch's transformation.

Ravitch describes the volume in the following way:

This is a book about my life, about admitting "I was wrong," and about how important it is to say it out loud. For many years, I advocated strongly for certain ideas in the field of education based on competition, standardization, and accountability. I felt sure such policies would produce higher test scores. But when I saw what happened after they were put into practice, I discovered that they didn't work and had bad consequences for students, teachers, and communities....My thinking evolved into a different political and social philosophy. To use current parlance, I went from being a staunch conservative to being "woke." (p. 1)



To the many educators who have followed Diane Ravitch, both those who have agreed and those who have disagreed with her arguments over the years, this kind of epiphany grabs one's attention.

Since *An Education* is basically an exceedingly personal memoir on Diane Ravitch's life, in my discussion of and response to it, I need to draw upon my own biography since we were pulled in very different directions.

In many ways, Ravitch and I share certain backgrounds. Both of our families were immigrants from Eastern Europe. Both avowed "being American." And both families did not have a strong history of academic accomplishments. But at the same time, there were very real differences economically and politically that predictably would have led and did lead Diane and me to be more receptive to particular educational, political, economic, and ideological arguments, policies, and practices. For her, this meant more conservative views, choices, and experiences. For me and many others, this meant more socially, politically, and educationally critical positions—and the activities that went with those.

In *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013a) I argue that one of the most important roles that critical "scholar/activists" can play is telling the truth about the relations of dominance and subordination that all too often characterize our society. It also requires that we look for spaces of possibility for interrupting these relations and then to act as "critical secretaries" of actually existing examples of institutions, movements, and people who are working hard to build and defend more thickly democratic realities. Added to this list of tasks is a commitment not to stand on the balcony, but to join in these actions oneself. While ultimately Ravitch takes on aspects of these more critically oriented tasks—and I for one am quite pleased about this—her initial background and the realities of class, race, and gendered relations and the habitus that accompanies them provide a powerful context for her choices for much of her life.

Both of our stories are varied, honest, and deeply personal. They document the struggles of real people in real institutions over time. While most of these accounts conclude with success, the theme of being uncomfortable and "between two worlds" often remains. Paraphrasing Raymond Williams's words, the "emergent" professional class cultural forms of the people today rub against the "residual" classed, gendered, and race cultural forms of their origins (see, for example, Williams, 1977). The result is the creation of what are sometimes tense and contradictory elements in people's identities. Both Ravitch and I embody these tensions and contradiction, but often in different ways.

Let me be honest here. Unlike Diane Ravitch, I come from a poor and deeply political working-class family. I am one of the first people in my immediate family to finish secondary school and was the very first to attend any form of post-secondary education. I worked as a printer for a number of years and went part-time to a small teachers college that only recently had transformed itself from a two-year institution to a four-year one. My initial experience in higher education seemed boring and disconnected from the vibrant cultural and political experience of the poor and largely immigrant community I was from.

The story does not end there. After some time in the Army, then teaching for a number of years in urban and rural schools in impoverished communities, and serving as the president of a teachers union while completing my undergraduate work part-time at two small teachers colleges, I applied—with much trepidation—to Columbia University for graduate study with a focus on education, philosophy, and sociology. After a period of “adjustment” —a word that doesn’t come close to how I felt—including like Ravitch worrying whether I really “belonged” in a demanding and rigorous setting like an Ivy League graduate school, I was awarded a fellowship. Given this personal history, it is no surprise that Ravitch’s biographical account of her life and the tensions within it before she became a well-known author with close connections to conservative educators was of interest to me. (For more on this, see Apple, 2013b and Apple, 2024).

The fact that neither of us originally saw ourselves as pursuing an academic career and as authors of influential books and the fact that we both somehow completed our graduate studies at Columbia University may have helped increase my interest as well.

However, there are also other substantive differences in my account that set me apart from the stories featured in *An Education*. I was what was then called a “Red Diaper Baby.” Members of my family were part of a long tradition of working-class radicalism that was found especially in textile workers and printers in the industrial cities of the East Coast of the U.S. Coming from this tradition, I found political activism to be “normal.” Indeed, while still a secondary school student, I was the publicity director of the Paterson, New Jersey chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality and was deeply involved in a number of mobilizations. Hence, I came to graduate school with an identity that was already partly politically formed by a working-class sensibility that was itself animated by anti-corporate and anti-racist sentiments and movements. And the studies in which I was involved at Columbia, complemented by the course work I also took at the New School for Social Research, provided me with a rich and detailed history of deeply committed intellectual work and with powerful examples of how such work could be and was connected to social transformation inside and outside of education. The fact that I continued my anti-racist, anti-corporate, and practical education work inside and outside of schools while I was at Columbia connected all of these things together in ways that were different than the stories told in *An Education*.

In addition, the very fact that I brought with me the years I spent dealing with the realities of teaching in poor communities—and with the tensions, joys, and political and educational necessities that were such key parts of this—meant that what seemed to have attracted Ravitch during much of the more conservative commitments and (mis)understandings years of her career would seem to me to be fundamentally disconnected to these realities. Indeed, I am convinced that if Ravitch had been more closely connected in practice to marginalized communities and to activists and to actual schools, to teaching, and to the complicated tasks of making curriculum organically related to the lives of students, she would have asked the critical social and educational questions that form the central focus of the 2nd half of *An Education* much earlier.

I do not intend my own personal narrative to be self-congratulatory. There are still times when I wonder “how did all this happen to me?” “How did a kid from the slums of New Jersey and who failed in his first foray into higher education get to be the holder of distinguished professorships while at the same time keeping alive a sense of working-class activism?” Like many others I’m sure, I still feel the tensions of being simultaneously inside and outside of the university. But to me, this is a richly productive tension. I do not ever want to be fully comfortable in higher education. This tension both reflects my background and my commitment and struggle to challenge and interrupt the role of education in reproducing the relations of dominance and subordination that still characterize it.

I often wonder if Diane Ravitch has experienced similar tensions. Given her account of the major changes in her life and in the political and educational commitments that she undergoes, I would be surprised if they were not there consciously and unconsciously. And given the realities she faced as a woman, I also have a feeling that some of these tensions are the results of her struggles over institutional legitimacy and acceptance. But, whatever acts as the background of her altering her position over the years, I welcome her transformation late or not.

I have had interactions with Ravitch over the years. This has included writing reviews of her books (Apple, 1996; Apple, 2010) and later on supporting her movement towards more progressive positions while still being critical of some of her positions (see, e.g., Apple, 2014). This led to brief correspondence with her as a result of this. It has also included experiences such as substantive in-person discussions at the Brookings Institute that she organized. This event featured intense debates over the question of what and whose knowledge should be taught. Among those engaged in these quite serious discussions were Ravitch, E. D. Hirsch, myself, and a number of other figures from across much of the educational spectrum. It became clear to me then that Ravitch was rightly struggling with some fundamental questions about what a more responsive set of educational policies would look like.

Let me also say that even when we have disagreed, I have always respected her. Indeed, as I said as early as 1996, I assume that Diane Ravitch is someone who is as deeply committed to a fair and socially just education as I am, even when our political and educational agendas may differ. I also assume that re-stratification and fostering the power of the ultra-conservative restoration is not what she wanted either.

However, given this, in light of the book of *An Education* one question that keeps coming to the forefront of my mind is this: What took her so long? After all, all along there has been compelling evidence about the politics and differential effects of dominant educational policies and practices.

Powerful examples that might have given her more reasons for her slow but increasingly steady support of more thickly democratic policies and practices were already there—if she had chosen to delve deeper. These included the Algebra Project in Baltimore, where minoritized students employed their growing mathematical knowledge to interrupt and stop the building of a new juvenile prison. It also could have included learning from one of the most critically

democratic journals in education—*Rethinking Schools*—where month after month and year after year deeply committed educators from throughout the country documented alternatives to the things that Ravitch now finds so problematic.

Perhaps some of the explanation does indeed lie in the initial chapters of the book. As I noted, the first half of *An Education* is a very detailed personal history of her childhood and family, her schooling in Texas, her experiences in college at Wellesley, her early work experiences, marriage, and motherhood. Some of this is emotionally gripping such as the death of her son. But let me again be honest here. As a whole, once more it seems both all too much and rather less socially critical than it might have been.

Having said this, the problem is partly redeemed by something else that embodies her crucial personal changes, something that appears to be quite significant. Her loving relationship with her wife Mary Butz and the influences this has had on her personal and professional politics play a key role. Very importantly, throughout the second half of the book it is treated as a “matter of fact.” I mean this as a compliment. Such loving relations are not “different” or out of the ordinary or, as the far-right would have it, “not what God intended.” Rather they should be and are “ordinary.” They embody an ethic of care and love that should characterize what is the best in us (Lynch, 2022). Mary is a deeply committed educator and the way Ravitch talks about their relationship and about what she continues to learn from Mary should not be treated as an after-thought. It provides another instance of a more emancipatory reality that we need to continue to build.

Such transformations are important on a social, not only individual, level. They provide a space where other people can imagine the possibility of questioning and ultimately moving away from their too easily accepted educational and ideological commitments. The fact that Ravitch was a well-known advocate for many of the dominant accepted commitments, and now rejects them, may make it easier for other people to envision such questioning for themselves.

Having said this, there still were times when I wished she had gone farther, especially around the issue of race. For example, the history of privatization, public choice theories, vouchers, homeschooling, and similar initiatives can largely be traced to racial politics and to reactions to the Supreme Court’s desegregation rulings (MacLean, 2017). As evidence of her transformation, over the past years Ravitch has rightly pointed to the negative and often racializing effects of such policies (Ravitch, 2014; Ravitch, 2016; Ravitch, 2020). While this is very welcome, saying more about this and deepening her discussion of these oppressive relations in policy and practice and more clearly connecting this to what she now rightly rejects could have added more power to her justified arguments. This might have been strengthened if she focused more on what she still has to learn. Transformations are never like a light switch. They are and should be continuing as we think and act more critically and learn more about what is necessary to understand dominance and subordination and act with others to interrupt these relations.

Of course, a very personal memoir such as this can't do everything. Given this, perhaps it's wiser to treat *An Education* less as simply as tale of an individual's complicated and at times contradictory life but as a pedagogical text. Are there certain things that are worth noting as possible lessons that people might take from Ravitch's account? Let me give two examples.

As a former teacher union president, as you might expect I welcome her increasing affiliation with major figures within teacher unions. Major gains have been made in the political commitments of such unions as they cement closer relationship with community activists. Throughout the country, influential teacher unions have combined a commitment to industrial unionization with social justice unionism. This is a movement that needs to be supported and emulated. That Ravitch has argued for the importance of this provides us with another alliance that can be built.

The fact that she has been influenced by and become close to Deborah Meier, one of the educators who has served as a model of the practical commitment to democratic schooling, is also worth noting (see, e.g., Apple & Beane, 2007), as is her connection with widely respected anti-racist critical scholars and her public support and defense of *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones, 2024).

It is not to diminish the substantive changes that Ravitch has undergone or the lessons that we might learn from her account that I want to raise one final difficult issue. Many people may point to *An Education* as evidence of personal ethical commitments ultimately being victorious over the power of money and neoliberal and conservative policies. In a number of ways that seems true. But the reason that *An Education* has such an audience is also because the ground of substantial opposition has been laid for this to be possible by years and years of committed work and often very real sacrifices by identifiable individuals, communities, and movements. It is these people's critically oriented intellectual, political, and educational efforts, efforts to which they have devoted their *entire* lives, that enable Diane Ravitch to relocate herself. Thus, one of the most important things we can and must do is recover and respect the history and current contributions of these collective movements by and for marginalized groups. When this is done, we can place *An Education* as one single story in the much larger intellectual, political, cultural, and educational, and practical struggles and contributions that did so much to make it possible for someone like Ravitch—and myself as well—to write things to which people pay attention.

In the end, then, I am left with mixed feelings. I continue to respect Diane Ravitch and hope that her personal story motivates others to raise crucial questions about dominant educational policies and practices. Read the book. But keep in mind not only what is there, but very importantly what is missing throughout. Thus, at the same time, use it to remind yourself of the utter importance of the large number of critical scholar/activists, critically democratic educators, emancipatory social movements and communities, and so much more that both historically and now have devoted their lives and taken very real risks in building and defending an education that is worthy of its name. Our stories are dependent on theirs.

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About the Reviewer

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About the Book Author



Diane Ravitch is a research professor of education at New York University and a historian of education. She is the Founder and President of the Network for Public Education (NPE). From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H. W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. She is the author of *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2014), *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010), as well as many other widely read works. She was elected to membership in the National Academy of Education (1979); the Society of American Historians (1984); the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1985); and as the Eleanor Roosevelt Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences (2002). She is currently the most influential voice on the state of public education in America. Her blog, <https://dianeravitch.net>, has received more than 42 million hits.

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