What's right – and wrong – in Diane Ravitch's new take on school reform

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Five friends, none of them teachers, have called to tell me they heard about Diane Ravitch's new book and her change of heart about the school reforms she advocated for a decade. "Lo! She's saying what you've been telling us!"
The publicity for Ravitch's book has certainly put her incisive critique of the reforms (privatizing education; using standardized tests to measure everything; looking to "choice" and charter schools drive improvement) in the news.

But it is revealing that Ravitch's book uses none of the scholarship that radical critics of NCLB published about the reforms she supported. Instead, she goes back and reinvents the wheel. (Susan Ohanian has traced the foundations that contributed $125,000 to the writing of the book.)

I noted in the panel at New York University in which Ravitch, Edward Fergus, and I appeared, Ravitch should be commended for her courage in criticizing the extremely powerful think tanks and figures (the "Billionaire Boys Club") with whom she previously hobnobbed. Her drive to set the record straight on how the reforms are destroying public education should be welcomed.

Still, it's important to note what she gets wrong and why. In the book she explains being "caught up" in the widespread "enthusiasm" for market reforms. She will not, however, name this as the neoliberal project. By the political yardstick she uses in the book, the American Enterprise Institute is a "well-respected conservative think tank." Someone whose first job in New York was at the New Leader, where she learned all about left sectarian politics and met Max Shachtman, (as she noted in our exchange before the panel), knows enough to name capitalism's latest iteration.

Ravitch won't name neoliberalism as the problem because it would force her to confront facts she'd rather ignore. Like the fact that 70% of the new jobs being created only require a minimal education. Or the fact that her idea of a great education is the Houston schools of her youth, a school system that was racially segregated.

Ravitch's very unpersuasive agenda to beat back the neoliberal assault is a return to the post WW2 welfare state, pre-Brown versus education and those messy social movements that created the culture wars. She wants a kinder, gentler neoconservative restoration, one shorn of neoliberalism's savagery. Her solutions include having parents (meaning minority parents) teach their kids how to behave right and read to them at home.
As I said in the panel, this solution won't do. I share Ravitch's critique but to halt this juggernaut we have to see the international dimension of the project and its roots in capitalism's appetite for greater profits from a workforce that competes in a race to the bottom.

Neoliberalism's project to privatize education and destroy the teacher unions (though perhaps they'll be permitted to exist in name only, in the West) can't be defeated with Ravitch's solutions. Diane will have to come on board with her radical critics if she's serious about reversing the destruction she describes so well in her book.