2008

Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Changes in American Liberalism

Andrew Geddings Childs
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

OCEAN HILL-BROWNSVILLE AND CHANGES IN AMERICAN LIBERALISM

BY

ANDREW GEDDINGS CHILDS

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree awarded:
Fall Semester, 2008
The members of the committee approve the thesis of Andrew Childs defended on August 21, 2008.

Dennis Moore  
Professor Directing Thesis

Susan Wood  
Committee Member

Neil Jumonville  
Committee Member

David Johnson  
Dean of Department of Humanities

Joseph Travis  
Dean of College of Arts and Sciences

The office of graduate studies and the college of arts and sciences has approved the thesis of Andrew Childs.
I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents and sister. Without their steadfast guidance, support and urging, many of my accomplishments would only be dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all the members of my Committee: Dr. Susan Wood, for all her keen advice into perspective and how to frame the issue, Dr. Neil Jumonville for his amazing breadth and depth of knowledge and insightful comments, and Dr. Dennis Moore. I have never met a more astute, kind, patient and thoughtful editor than Dr. Moore. I am truly thankful to him for allowing me to take some of his expertise with me.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. vi
INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................... 1
EDUCATION: THE SAVIOR OF THE SOUL ............................................................... 7
THE BLIGHTED LAND ............................................................................................... 14
SHANKER OR MCCOY ............................................................................................... 21
PROFESSIONALISM AND MERITOCRACY AGAINST COMMUNITY
CONTROL .................................................................................................................... 30
“INTEGRATIONIST LIBERALISM” OR NEOLIBERALISM ...................................... 38
CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................... 47
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 50
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .......................................................................................... 56
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship of the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville and a change away from New Deal liberalism and toward separatism. Through historicizing this issue, I also critique the changing nature of professionalism, the push for community control and decentralization of schools, and how these ideas influenced democracy in education. Various people involved in the confrontation during the summer and fall of 1968 represent the particular positions of each side of the issue. Further, these two sides are also personified in the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and the advocates of community control and decentralization. Through my examination, I attempt to locate the importance of the experiment in community control in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district under the greater context of American liberalism.
While the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville occurred four decades ago, the event’s importance to American liberalism is largely unexplored. A few scholars such as Marilyn Gittell and Richard Kahlenberg have commented on the incident’s significance to liberalism, I attempt to build upon their research and contextualize Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s role in the change in liberalism that occurred in the late 1960’s. Building on a synthesis of previous scholars’ work, I attempt to locate the confrontation as part of a change in American liberalism which is reflective of the changing culture of the 1960’s. Finally, I will explore the impact this change had on education.

As Gittell notes in “Community Control of Education”, “the Ocean Hill-Brownsville confrontation revealed an entanglement of strange alliances. For the most part, conservatives and the more radical left empathized with the black poor. The beneficiaries of the New Deal liberal social revolution were juxtaposed against them. These new political and social alignments caused by the school crisis indicate a confusion widespread in the nation. People most reluctant to change, those nostalgically yearning for the Roosevelt era, are reactionary liberals. Theirs is basically a quantitative social philosophy conceiving the root cause of poverty to be merely a lack of money. They naturally resist structural and qualitative changes” (9). She and other scholars illustrate how the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy brought friend and foe together and
simultaneously alienated traditional social and political partners throughout the summer and fall of 1968. It is important to note that when speaking of the incident at Ocean Hill-Brownsville, we must understand that the confrontation lasted several months throughout the summer and fall of 1968. Moreover, while I am interested in the event as a whole, the reader should also understand that during Ocean Hill-Brownsville, there were many smaller incidents that together, characterize the entire fiasco. As many before me have duplicated in detail, the events of that summer and fall, I am not going to simply summarize their reports. Rather, I suggest that readers wanting a detailed account of the events leading up to and including the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville should consult chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Windell Pritchett’s Brownsville Brooklyn: Blacks Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto.

The new pacts and rifts created from the struggle at Ocean Hill-Brownsville resulted in a cultural smog, where accusations of anti-Semitism and racism, notions of jobs security, ideas about professionalism and meritocracy versus decentralization, and questions concerning the very tenets of liberalism and democracy, all hung like a pall over New York City. The teachers’ strike in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, born from this miasma of causes and sociopolitical forces, underscores the turbulent sixties. The controversy is an entanglement, not only of causal factors but of implications as well. To understand the social and political ramifications of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, we must endeavor to untangle the constituent parts from one another and trace their genealogy to the present. Through historicizing the issue, I seek to situate Ocean Hill-Brownsville as a pivotal point in the history of American liberalism from which modern concepts of liberalism in part, inherited their critical, social capital.

This issue is important not only because 2008 is the fortieth anniversary of the strike but also because exploring the incident illuminates many of the contemporary issues surrounding education and professionalism within education. Further, I also believe that neoliberalism (admittedly a vague idea, yet one that many scholars use), can trace some of its ideological ancestry to the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville as well. While Ocean Hill-Brownsville occurred forty years ago, many critics continue to write about ways the relationship between race, civil rights, and labor is still contested; this is especially true in the wake of the movement away from what Gittell deems “a new
deal liberal society” (9) and toward new concepts of liberalism and even neoliberalism. Moreover, while Ocean Hill-Brownsville revealed the latent yet rumbling tensions of peoples’ associations to organized labor and racial identity, one must ask: How much has changed since the uneasy truce after Ocean Hill-Brownsville? Have we resolved the tensions between organized labor and feelings toward racial identities? How did Ocean Hill-Brownsville change the nature of professionalism and viewpoints on meritocracy? Likewise, what legacy did Ocean Hill-Brownsville leave for education and education policy? At the very heart of the matter, the incident raised questions about community control of education, and advocates of community control accused the professionals of being elitist and out of touch. Are professional educators any less elitist and more in touch with community needs than in 1968?

To speak of changes in liberalism and neoliberalism invokes many branches of ideas. I am only interested in the branches that affect ideas about education or rather, their effect on education, and how those ideas have some of their roots in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis. During the late 1960’s, no one used the term neoliberal or neoliberalism when describing the conflict at Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Nevertheless, if we speak of a change in liberalism, then neoliberalism is certainly part of that change and even grows from it. I am investigating neoliberalism’s social, economic, and political fabric but, only as it relates to ideas about education. For purposes of this paper, I agree with the article by Amy Wells et al., “Defining Democracy in the Neoliberal Age: Charter School Reform and Educational Consumption” where they define neoliberalism as “free-market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine governments’ incompetent bureaucracy” (343). I am interested in discovering neoliberalism’s history as part of the change in liberalism and how both relate to Ocean Hill-Brownsville. I contend that Ocean Hill-Brownsville, as a pivot point, offers insight into the formulation of neoliberal ideas and a division between classical ideas about liberalism and the new separatist liberalism of Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael.

Ironically, the shifting of emphasis toward race and away from organized labor in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike demonstrates a neoliberal tendency. Proponents of the community control experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, including Gittell and Rhody
McCoy (who was the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district administrator), argued that the teachers’ union was blockading their efforts and was an impediment to their egalitarian goals. This claim set the stage for the subsequent broader war on organized labor. Paradoxically, by focusing on the teachers’ union as a barrier to civil rights, organized labor became the central focus, thus relegating a concern for civil rights to the background. This focus on labor reflects neoliberalism’s current emphasis on labor and its relative silence on civil rights issues.

Historicizing Ocean Hill-Brownsville is crucial to my overall goal of placing the event as part of the locus of change around liberalism and the subsequent formulation of neoliberalism. Only by understanding some of the essential figures involved in the controversy, their actions, and words, can I claim that the incident marks an ideological split in American liberalism. This division has significant sociopolitical implications. Whereas many today are concerned with free-market terms and ideals, traditional or classic liberalism, as Wells et al. refer to it, is comprised of democratic and civil rights ideals (343). Further, as Neil Jumonville notes in New York Intellectuals Reader, “integrationist liberalism” encompassed more of a spirit of unity and optimism versus black separatism that advocated black disunity from white society (342). In addition, implicit in the ideological tug-of-war between the various factions swirling around the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers’ strike are questions about the nature of democratic participation. Is the individual the fundament of democracy or is it the community? Albert Shanker, who was the leader of the AFT, and Rhody McCoy personify the struggle between these two democratic ideals respectively.

I am not saying that Ocean Hill-Brownsville precipitated the mammoth struggle over the meaning of democracy or the change in liberalism. Instead, Ocean Hill-Brownsville is part of the larger social milieu from which these debates sprang, and the entire incident at Ocean Hill-Brownsville helped to catalyze the struggle between the forces of liberalism. In essence, Ocean Hill-Brownsville was as symptomatic as it was causal of this struggle. By examining critically the events at Ocean Hill-Brownsville, I endeavor to demonstrate how Ocean Hill-Brownsville was a catalyst for the ideological struggle over the direction and meaning of liberalism and for the re-defining of democracy’s foundational principles.
Along with Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s role in the evolution of liberalism, it also played a part in the demise of black-Jewish relations. Richard Kahlenberg notes: “The one immediate impact was a fraying of the relationship between the black community and the Jewish community in New York, and to a certain extent nationally. Therefore, the two Stalwart allies in the fight for civil rights and a fair society were split apart on this question, which was very important politically. In some ways, you could say that Ocean Hill-Brownsville helped spawn neoconservatism in New York City and nationally” (qtd. in Treiman 2). Thus, examining the Ocean Hill-Brownsville incident gives insight into other political issues of our society. As Podair states in his article, “The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York’s Antogone”, Ocean Hill-Brownsville also relates to issues such as affirmative action and the meritocracy system (8-9). Moreover, the confrontation also helps explain why the Democratic Party, which is ostensibly the worker party, does not win the white working-class votes in elections (2).

Perhaps what is most remarkable is that in spite of its societal and cultural contributions, Ocean Hill-Brownsville receives little attention. Many scholars understand and even write about liberalism and democracy and some comprehend the importance of Ocean Hill-Brownsville to these movements; however, I believe the incident has not received enough attention as a contributing and reflective factor of the national and even international relationship between liberalism, neoliberalism, and democracy.

In order to flesh out and justify my contention that Ocean Hill-Brownsville represents a pivotal point in American liberalism and that this change has had profound effects on education, it is necessary to review a brief history of education and the community of Ocean Hill-Brownsville: the arguments in favor of community control and decentralization; arguments in favor of the union and professionalism; and how these issues affect society today. Community control and decentralization were the central educational policies at issue, and these two ideas have their origins in the Black Power movement of the mid-1960’s. As the Black Power movement was gaining traction, President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty as well as changes in pedagogical techniques also contributed to a call for community control and decentralization. The teachers’ union in New York City also played a complicated and controversial role in the escalation of the conflict, yet it is a role that some prefer to oversimplify in order to
engender their particular point of view. I will also demonstrate that contemporary accounts of the incident tended to reflect more polarized viewpoints than historians and commentators in the current decade; some critics at the time of the strike, however, later proffered more mitigating views.

The teachers’ strike at the experimental community control district in Ocean Hill-Brownsville offers insights into contemporary political arrangements, the debate surrounding school choice, changes notions of professionalism, how the American meritocratic system functions, school vouchers, and the viability of the teachers’ unions. By investigating this past event on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary, I hope to make connections to our modern political circumstances and make sense of seemingly normal or traditional political alliances, what Berube and Gittell have called an “entanglement of strange alliances” (9) and what Kahlenberg characterizes as the “central political riddle of why the party of working people consistently loses the white-working class votes” (5).
CHAPTER 1 EDUCATION: THE SAVOIR OF THE SOUL

In order to contextualize properly Ocean Hill-Brownsville within the larger subject of the status of education and liberalism, it is necessary to discuss the history of education in the United States and its theoretical background as it relates to pedagogy. This section of my thesis deals more with the cultural and theoretical underpinnings that contributed to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville fiasco. This section does not deal with the specific events of the 1968 strike; rather, I attempt to trace the genealogy of how educational policy contributed to the rise of the individual in our society, what role education plays in our society, and how these themes contributed to the mayhem and controversy surrounding Ocean Hill-Brownsville. When discussing pedagogy, it is remiss to leave out a discussion of progress because progress links to education and professionalism. As Thomas Popkewitz declares in “The Culture of Redemption”, professionals and educational policy makers have etched the notion of progress onto the canvas of education. To educate is to progress, and the gatekeepers of this progress are teachers. Teachers mete out progress in the form of information and educational technique to the child. This meted knowledge is of a secular nature, ruled by rational, scientific thought. Progress, education, and education theory, however, have traditionally encapsulated more than only secular views.

With the supplantation of religion, progress ushered education and social policy into roles as the new saviors of our society. Traditionally, religious knowledge and devotion were the lighthouses of students; however, education based on secular principles guided students out of the turbid waters of religion and onto the shores of rational thought, research, and scholarship (Popkewitz 3). The new education and its policies formed a necessary link between personal and public achievement and education. In order to be successful, one had to attain a certain level of education.

By the end of the nineteenth century, society had adopted a new method of defining personal worth and success based on the new secular fundamentals of educational achievement. A new definition of the self meant that people began defining
their existence by what they had accomplished educationally. This trend persists. Think about some of the first questions individuals in our society ask one another: what do you do for a living? Whom do you work for? Where did you go to school? Implicit in those questions is the notion of one’s educational achievement. Nowadays, people’s self-worth is largely dependent on one’s job and the educational level of training associated with that job like, say, the training required for physicians. Because we pin much of our identity to our educational achievement and therefore what job we have, other areas of our life, like our community or even family, may become less relevant. While the citizens of Ocean Hill-Brownsville might not have been consciously aware of the exact historical progression of education, they nonetheless realized the significance of an education. Moreover, the citizens understood that pedagogical technique and curriculum were important to achieving a good education. It is in part because of this realization that education is vital to one’s standing and ultimate self-worth, that education became such a contentious issue in the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

Curriculum in schools progressed to feed the trend into self-definition and self-actualization through work and education (10). While Popkewitz documents this curricular change, his assertion that school curriculum sought to develop a productive citizen and worker begs the question, what should be the function of school curriculum? If not to produce productive citizens and workers, then what? Certainly, in a society framed by “separation of church and state” and where public schools have governmental oversight, schools cannot exist to foster religious scholars as a primary goal. Therefore, it seems natural that schools evolved into creators of productive citizens, i.e., workers and that this evolution occurred along secular lines. Perhaps more disconcerting was the ability of education to become the harbingers of truth. Educational policy developed into the dispersers of a truth (Popkewitz 9), but it was a truth based on their own imprimatur and with the ingredients they chose. Decentralization and community control were in direct opposition to this truth. These two new movements in the black community were anti-establishment. In fact, community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville was an attempted to hail a new truth or new set of truths. Yet educational policy makers incorporated their vision of the past and their vision of the future to concoct a recipe for the truth that morphed into policies of segregation and a strong centralized bureaucracy.
This process of truth-building helped to professionalize education (Popkewitz 9). As keepers and distributors of the truth (or faith), education had a brave new future. Education became the American path to enlightenment, self-fulfillment, and ultimately, the new savior of the soul. Unfortunately, as the parade of truth marched onward, the citizens of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the black population of America were inefficiently sitting on the curb.

The new truth purported by educational theorists had implications for professionalism in education. As David Carr notes, “recognising that the heart of a professional response to a client’s difficulties is moral means appreciating effective professionalism is more than just the acquisition of a repertoire of rational problem-solving or other skills: it is also quite crucially a matter of acquiring certain kinds of principles, values, attitudes, sensibilities and sentiments—of becoming, as it were, a particular sort of person” (61). Thus, as professionals, teachers needed a certain set of skills that allowed them to become a “particular sort of person”, and decentralization and community control represented an affront to these established set of skills. As education redefined the self, decentralization and community control sought to redefine the professional teacher.

My point here is that the teaching profession requires a moral quality. This moral quality has an especially broad background that emphasizes generality and connectedness to society, rather than, say, technical knowledge about curriculum or methodology (Carr 61). Teachers need more than specialized skills based on research to deal with problems they face. In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the community witnessed a deterioration of the “connectedness” and moral underpinnings of the teacher replaced with a predilection for professionalism and specialized knowledge. Some might argue that this moral ability is intrinsic to teachers and that they already possess these skills--otherwise they would not be teachers. This is a dangerous assumption, however, and one that the vitriolic and often times intractable teachers union demonstrated in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Nevertheless, by aligning with the other social sciences and thus relying heavily on technical knowledge, education sacrificed breadth of knowledge and discourse about education’s connection to society in favor of more technical, expert knowledge, which in turn had a
direct effect on the experience of Ocean Hill-Brownsville citizens within their education system.

As a social science, education endeavored to answer social questions through systematic, rational, and scientific thought but with governmental purview. John Dewey and others believed that the technique of science and research incorporated into education would lead to progress along liberal, democratic lines. Further, in *John Dewey: America’s Philosopher of Democracy*, David Fott notes that unlike other social scientists, Dewey believed that the public should be a part of the political decision making process (29). Others, like Walter Lippman, believed that only economic and political elites should make important decisions and that social scientists alone should inform these decisions (30). In addition, because community was central to Dewey’s political thought (30), one can view community control as a form of Deweyan democracy.

Thus, while it was necessary to save the student’s soul through education, it was equally necessary to train the educator how to rescue it. Dewey favored the laboratory approach to teacher education that valued experimentation and scientific inquiry versus the apprenticeship approach that valued tradition (Shulman 512-13). Dewey bases his argument for the laboratory approach on likening the teaching profession to other professions, such as medicine and law. In these other professions, intellectual method preceded mastery of the craft and this technique is what Dewey sought to establish for the education profession (Shulman 513). Pushing his position even further, Dewey believed that educators should not rely on their personal experiences or those of their colleagues over the findings and research of scholars (Shulman 514). Once Dewey convinced the educational establishment that his method was the best, education’s link to the other social sciences was complete. Because education was now a bona-fide profession, it could adopt its own organizations, associations, and unions. On a deeper, societal level, education was now a prerequisite to success, both professionally and personally.

In addition to the linking of education and success, progress became synonymous with the individual (Popkewitz 5); people achieved progress individually. This individual achievement also meant that education was an individual process and one achieved self-actualization through education individually. As if the undercurrent of individualism in
the American culture was not strong enough, education provided new fodder to individualism.

The individual revolution of education served to reinforce accountability, personal responsibility, and achievement. Weakened though not extinct, notions of community were second to the individual, as the individual became the main agent of progress. Along with this individualization, the secular move of education as a profession closely aligned to the other social sciences meant that education assumed a prominent role in society; indeed, the public was beginning to recognize it as the savior of the soul. With such technical knowledge at its core, yet a lack of connectedness to education’s main purpose in society, education failed the minority student, specifically blacks. As black students sought an education in the ghetto schools, the technical expertise of the teachers’ was of little use to the real-world problems facing many of the students. Thus, as education had become the savior of the mainstream student’s soul, it had lost the soul of the ghetto student.

Participation in schools and the idea of community choice also invokes images of democracy. As Wells et al. note, there are many different forms of democracy, including liberal, communitarian, deliberative and radical (340). What is important in the case of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, however, is that citizens felt the central board of education obviated the entire participatory nature of democracy. Nevertheless, during the civil rights movement, people viewed government as an important player in promoting democratic principles. Government was the securer of minority rights and the vehicle through which minorities could pursue equal rights (342). Likewise, a goal of education is to prepare students to participate in a liberal, democratic society. Achieving this goal requires a substantial measure of objectivity for schools; however, minorities during the civil rights movement realized that public schools in our democratic society were not culturally objective (Burton 275), and communities like Ocean Hill-Brownsville realized the need to develop their own schools that reflected their particular culture.

Because the liberal, democratic tradition had excluded black communities, black activists in education attempted to liberate the black mind from the mire of dominant, i.e. primarily white culture. According to Daniel Pelstein, the movement to awaken blacks and empower them first occurred in the south with the freedom schools movement (255).
The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, which was a group of black civil rights activists in the south, sought to enfranchise poor southern blacks by revealing their political and social positions (255). SNCC initially stressed the importance of people as developmental beings and as such emphasized the participatory nature of democracy (255). Nonviolence, the decency of humanity and therefore whites, were hallmarks of the ideological underpinnings of SNCC and the incipient civil rights movement. These early advocates of black education believed that Americans’ inherent goodness and commitment to democracy would aid in the liberation of poor black communities (255). The belief in America’s goodness, however, waned as activists realized that America was “hopelessly racist” (256). As the optimism of the early civil rights movement and SNCC declined, Black Nationalism waxed. The Black Nationalist movement celebrated separatism, thereby influencing the vogue of black education along similar lines. Separatism and an emphasis on community control replaced the notions of integration and the beneficence of people. Personifying this ideological shift were institutions like the Black Panthers and movements like the community control experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

A potential downfall of the experiment in community control was an absence of specific curriculum goals. Many of the proponents of community control, like Gittell and Berube, do not specifically list how one should change curriculum to meet the goals of community control. Rather, in their papers and books, they write mostly about the general importance of community control, its philosophical underpinnings, and how best to implement the change from centralization to a decentralized system. This tendency reveals a partial irony in the community control and decentralization movement. In order to articulate the exact measures and techniques people like Gittell and Berube wanted in the curriculum of community control, they would have needed to consult the professionals who were well-versed in the art of curriculum development. Of course, curriculum development relies on the technical, specified knowledge that many community control advocates eschewed. Thus, in order to beat their enemy, community control and decentralization advocates needed to join them.

Social equality and mobility for the black community lay at the crossroads of Black Power, education and democracy. Acquiring social mobility and equality meant
that blacks could be on equal footing with whites and participate in the pursuit of the American Dream. To accomplish their goal, blacks in this movement felt they must hasten their own change, their own rebaptism into a society that had previously excommunicated them from the democratic tradition. Black Nationalists, however, longed for a black community that was largely self-contained—creation of a new and parallel existence rather than a rebaptism. Integrationists of the early civil rights movement and traditional liberalism, on the other hand, championed a renewed incorporation into society and sought to change the system from within. Nevertheless, as the shift away from integration burgeoned, a pedagogical shift blossomed as well (Perlstein 257). Community control is a reflection of the shift. Ironically, community control, with its ideological ancestry rooted in the desire to achieve democratic participation, feted local participation at the expense of participation in the larger society. Indeed, some people did not consider blacks and whites potential allies. Before, they could have united in a common, participatory, democratic cause; now, the effort to “root out, and destroy the racial oppressor” encapsulated the Black Separatist movement (259).

This is not to say that community control was as radical an idea as the Black Panthers were a group. On the contrary, many viewed the idea of community control as a vital step to achieving some measure of parity in education between blacks and whites.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville is a social tableau painted with the brushes of various historical and educational movements. The progression of liberalism and education abandoned blacks, while democratic participation was an unfamiliar concept to some blacks. Participation in our democratic society facilitates social mobility, and community control was an effort to inscribe black students with the knowledge necessary to succeed. As a response to black disenfranchisement, the community control experiment at Ocean Hill-Brownsville symbolizes a culmination of education philosophy, historical black frustration, and a liberalism that did not include blacks. Understanding this culmination helps create an historical framework from which to examine the crisis at Ocean Hill-Brownsville but also, a lens to study current trends in education and discover how liberalism evolved and continues to evolve--as neoliberalism--to meet new educational challenges.
Located in Brooklyn, Ocean Hill-Brownsville refers to a shared space between Brownsville to the south and Bedford-Stuyvesant to the north. Ocean Hill-Brownsville as a neighborhood is quite small and is more indicative of the border area between Brownsville and Bedford-Stuyvesant than a discrete neighborhood. The area has traditionally been a working class neighborhood and a haven for immigrants. In his comprehensive history of Brownsville, Windell Pritchett explains that like other urban areas throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it experienced an influx of poor individuals and their families where the promise of economic prospects lured them into the community (1). By 1940, the area was predominantly Jewish with approximately 100,000 residents; however, by 1970 the neighborhood’s demographics had changed to a population of nearly 70,000, fully 75 per cent of whom were black, and 20 per cent Puerto Rican (1). At the time of the strike in 1968, the area was largely black and yet the teaching force was nearly 90 per cent white and heavily Jewish (Pritchett 2).

The major finances for the experiment in community control came from the Ford Foundation (Gittell Decentralization 676). The office of New York mayor John Lindsay publicly supported the experiment and with the influence of the Ford Foundation, both institutions initially championed the idea. Unfortunately, neither of them recognized the sensitivity of the issue, and both were unprepared for the ensuing controversy. Underestimating the United Federation of Teachers in the New York City area meant that when the situation exploded, the Foundation and the mayor’s office had little negotiating power. Ultimately, both organizations yielded to the power of the AFT.

In 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville was not the only district to undergo the community control experiment; there were two other districts in the greater New York City area conducting the same experiment, but neither of these districts received the national attention or witnessed the contentiousness of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Similarly, all three experimental districts were poorer communities. Why was there a stronger push in poorer districts for community control than in more affluent districts? In Len Sperry’s 1972
article, “Community Control: A Proposal,” he answers this question by citing a study by sociologist R. Jean Hills. Sperry writes that in Hills’ study, upper-middle-class communities exerted more unofficial community control on the local school system because the community was able to place pressure on the schools and had a desire to do so (146). Sperry continues in his own words by explaining that in lower income communities, pressure from the neighborhood was low and teachers felt a disconnection between school and community. While Sperry presents Hills’ study as support for community control, there are several problems with the study. Sperry implies that poorer communities care less for the success of their children because they do not exert as much pressure on schools. This assumption is not necessarily true for several reasons. First, it is quite feasible that parents in poor communities must work longer hours and would therefore have less time than, say, a homemaker in an affluent neighborhood to pressure the local school board. Second, if it is true that parents in poorer communities care less for their children’s education, why is it reasonable to assume that legislating community control would make a difference? Society cannot outlaw apathy. The more appropriate characterization would have been to explain that certain barriers precluded disenfranchised community members from participating in their local schools—much the same way they are precluded from participating in democracy. Nevertheless, community control was an opportunity for citizens to assert agency. From their perspective, neighborhood schools had become repositories of the underachievers, a place for professional elites to deliver a perfunctory education that did not address the needs of the community or its students.

What makes the teachers’ strike in Ocean Hill-Brownsville ironic is that historically, as several sources demonstrate, Jews and blacks in the neighborhood had worked together. They were at least tolerant of each other and at most participated in some of the same organizations. In his article “The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Strike: New York’s Antigone” Podair claims that many viewed black and Jewish relations as a model in Ocean Hill-Brownsville (1-2). As the ghetto’s racial composition changed, whites moved out of the area and public housing increased. The neighborhood began a long

---

cycle of decline, and by the time of the teachers’ strike in 1968 racial tensions, economic forces and the Black Power Movement churned the sentiments of the Brownsville community into a clarion call for decentralization of schools. The merging of these forces created a torrent that the traditional levee of black-Jewish relations could not contain. Further, as Podair notes, the superficial goodwill between blacks and Jews belied seething tensions that heightened the fervor of the community control issue (1).

The strike also formed a strange alliance between two groups that both Podair and Gittell demonstrate had, historically, been nemeses: Jews and Catholics. Prior to the strike, the two groups rarely interacted, read different newspapers, went to different schools, and lived in different communities (Podair qtd. in Weiss 3). On the other hand, once racial tensions exploded, the Jewish community aligned with Catholics in an unequivocal statement demonstrating the whiteness of Jews. Interestingly, the racial identification of Jews was somewhat ambiguous. Jewish racial identity vacillated between white and non-white and largely depended on circumstance. In the case of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, whatever measure of whiteness the Jewish community felt was enough to solidify their racial identification with Catholics and other whites in New York. Facilitating the alliance, the Catholic church publicly absolved Jews of blame in the deaths of Christ and of Frances Spellman, an important figure and barrier to Jewish-Catholic relations who had died in 1967 (Antigone 4-5).

Paradoxically, the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty also played a role in the rise of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville fiasco. During the 1960’s, the War on Poverty succeeded in giving agency to the poor. Poverty programs reconstructed the poor as self-reliant, capable, autonomous, and even competitive people. The goal of this program was nobly to enfranchise the poor, to make them feel they had a purpose, and ultimately move them out of poverty. The communities most affected by poverty, especially in the late 1960’s, were African-American communities. Largely because of segregation and institutionalized racism, poverty disproportionately affected blacks as well as other minorities, and many of the policies of the War on Poverty reached out to the black community. What’s more, not only did the poor gain agency but also the community was

2 Several scholars mention this phenomenon, e.g. Pritchett, chapter 7; Popkewitz (especially pp. 11-13); and the Weiss article in the New Jersey Jewish News.
a vital component in securing agency and power for its members. Helping to create a situation where citizens had a sense of optimism, activism, and unity ironically facilitated the ardent resistance the school board and teachers’ union faced from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community.

As Marilyn Gittell noted in 1972 in “Decentralization and Citizen Participation in Education,” urban public education is the best site to witness decentralization and citizen control (670). Ocean Hill-Brownsville is a prime example of this change, and the black community realized that they had an opportunity to usurp the power that the white power structure had traditionally exercised over their community. As Karp noted in 1969, schooling in the neighborhood had a tradition of failure, with reform efforts equally dismal. At the time of the strike, integration efforts sent 4000 students in Ocean Hill-Brownsville to “white schools” where they were largely unwelcome (64). With variables such as an individual’s race, education, and organized labor, Ocean Hill-Brownsville turned into a crucible of competing ideologies, with each side steadfastly clinging to its beliefs.

Spaces of power also played an important role leading up to the conflict. The typical school board members in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community were middle to upper-middle-class professionals. Most had demonstrated some past leadership responsibilities, though not necessarily in education policy (Gittell 671). Rarely were board members blue-collar workers, teachers, or lower management people. This trend in board membership contributed to or at least further developed the schism between the black community and proponents of community control. Because of the traditional business background of board members, the board was conservatively slanted. Moreover, white, middle to upper-middle-class people constituted the board and thus the community felt a deep disconnection between its needs and the knowledge and policy of the board (673). The idea of community control became more than simply an organizational scheme to the black community. The idea embodied empowerment and autonomy, while the board represented bureaucratization and legacy of exclusion; after all, Ocean Hill-Brownsville had no representatives on their local school board (Karp 64).

Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s plight was a dream deferred. Watching those in power make decisions that affected the black community without eliciting much, if any, input
from the black community was a legacy. In Langston Hughes’ poem “A Dream Deferred,” he eloquently encapsulates the dreams of the black community for self-determination in an excellent metaphor for the struggle in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. In it, he asks whether a dream deferred sags “like a heavy load? Or, does it explode?” The “dream” of the black community was decentralization and community control. Strengthening the symbolism of that dream was a desire to overcome the traditional forces of history, to no longer run and dodge, to assume control of their own destiny. Far from sagging, this dream of the black community, when it ran into resistance from the union and Jewish community, exploded onto the national scene and into the vast historical landscape.

In addition to the school board, the other power holders in the community were professional staff and the union. These two sources of power monopolized education policy in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and other disintegrated school systems (Gittell 673). Not only did the black community face resistance from the school board, they also faced strong resistance in the union and its “professional” constituents. The union was highly organized and had written contracts to which they could refer as a legitimate source of authority. Moreover, the entities backing the black community in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the mayor’s office and the Ford Foundation, underestimated their own ability to deal with the professionals and the teachers union as well as the resolve of the teachers union and the controversy of decentralizing the school system (Gittell “Decentralization” 676). When the situation came to a boiling point, neither the mayor nor the Ford Foundation had any power in negotiating with the teachers union. Not only did the sheer number of teachers in the union and their collective power overwhelm the mayor and Ford Foundation, but they proved too strong for the black community as well.

Control and power were certainly at the heart of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis, yet the advocates of community control did not grasp fully the implications of decentralization. “Simple acts” such as hiring principals, hiring and firing teachers, and the allocation of funds challenged the policies of personnel retention and promotion (Gittell 676). Not only did the community control experiment challenge these routing measures, it also challenged institutionalized racism and the merit-based, civil service system (676). The term “simple acts” is, however, slightly misleading. By using “simple
acts,” Gittell oversimplifies the issue. Hiring and firing personnel and the allocation of resources are often quite contentious and complicated. With racialized overtones and careers at stake, personnel and resource matters were sensitive and complex issues—far from simple. Contrarily, characterizing the issue as “strictly contractual,” as the union attempted (Ritterband 252), is equally inappropriate.

Gittell’s 1972 article recognizes this complexity when she explains that the typical power holders in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were “professional staff and the unions” (673). These two entities dominated education in the district as well as other disintegrated ones. Clearly, any challenge to procedure is a challenge to power, which is to say, politics. The personification of power was the Board of Education in New York City. This bureaucracy was at least superficially in favor of decentralization. Initially reluctant, the board acquiesced to the growing pressure from the community and issued its statement on decentralization. Instead of the word “control” the board used “involvement” (Karp in Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville 67), which mitigated the potential influence of the community and the obligation the board had to incorporate the community in district policy.

Typical board members were middle to upper-middle class white business leaders. Most legitimized their ability to serve on the board by demonstrating previous leadership responsibilities in business (Gittell “Decentralization” 671). Why prior business success necessarily showed sufficient training for a school board position is unclear. If these business people were not involved in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, their knowledge was even less useful. Ironically, knowledge of education policy was at the heart of anti-community control sentiment. Richard Karp’s “School Decentralization in New York” quotes a white community member as saying, “we believe the people of this community are not educated and socially elevated enough to run the schools” (Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville 71). While prior business experience might have had nothing to do with preparing one to administer and create school policy, apparently educational achievement and social status did. Advocates of community control thought this claim spurious and that it was a reinvention of the cycle of minority

---

exclusion. By requiring a certain social status with educational achievement as prerequisites for managing schools and simultaneously denying blacks the chance at an education through disintegration (and education functions here as social mobility), the cycle of disenfranchisement in Ocean Hill-Brownsville continued.

Born out of a legacy of segregation and competing ideas on how to remedy segregation’s ills, the experiment in community control at Ocean Hill-Brownsville has many facets. As education evolved into the main agent of social mobility, as the confrontation demonstrates, calls for educational reform in places like Ocean Hill-Brownsville increased. Likewise, the kind of reform and the question of how to implement it (in this case community control), were as litigious as segregation itself. As we shall see in the next chapter, the union’s stance offers more insight into the competing ideologies whirling around this issue.
CHAPTER 3: SHANKER OR MCCOY

Today, the various teachers’ unions have become powerful, organized institutions. The transitory nature of students and families and the cyclical nature of school years and graduation provide a stark contrast to the relative permanency of the union and teachers. If we consider the more formal barriers to integration and movement of black students in place during the time of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, it is understandable how the union could have had a stranglehold on the system. In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the union was a branch of the United Federation of Teachers, known locally as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). 4 Historically, the strength of the AFT has been located in the urban, local level (Dewing 79). While strength at the state level had been low, its various local branches were powerful. Moreover, because of its progressive, almost militant social stance, the AFT’s members were disproportionately members of minorities, particularly, Catholics, Jews and blacks (Dewing 79). Because of their collective bargaining powers, teachers unions were becoming more politically active around the time of Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

Prior to the 1960’s, teachers unions had been local and less politically active. The process of collective bargaining in New York City in 1961 led to an increase in membership and thus an increase in the teachers unions’ power (Berube 2). During the strike at Ocean Hill-Brownsville, New York City teachers supplied nearly one third of the total membership of the AFT (Dewing 79). Therefore, while the National Education Association, a rival union to the AFT, was larger nationally, the AFT had a near monopoly in New York. In light of these figures, the AFT’s citywide strike was clearly enough to paralyze New York City schools. As I have previously mentioned, Gittell noted that no one grasped fully the implications of decentralization, in part because no one believed the AFT would or could successfully call a citywide strike. Remember too

4 Rolland Dewing’s article “The American Federation of Teachers and Desegregation” is especially helpful in historicizing the AFT. Through his explication, he shows the AFT to be an organization concerned with civil rights. In fact, Dewing demonstrates that the AFT stood as an institution on the cusp of the civil rights movement, more progressive than its rival union the NEA. Readers interested in the specific steps the AFT undertook to facilitate integration as well as the AFT’s history with the civil rights movement should consult this article.
that the power of the teachers union was a new advent. Today, many understand the significance of the union as it relates to teacher contracts, attitudes and its ability to strike; however, in 1968 few understood the potential power of the union.

As we will see, critics of the union attempt to demonize it in an attempt to assign the majority of blame on the AFT’s intransigence. It is easy to accuse the AFT of racism. Rolland Dewing’s “The American Federation of Teachers and Desegregation” provides a helpful history of the AFT. Considering the AFT’s history of racial desegregation, activism, and egalitarian measures, to accuse the AFT of racism contradicts the history of the organization. Indeed, several years before Ocean Hill-Brownsville—in a collective bargaining struggle—the NAACP pledged full support to the AFT because of its positive stance on civil rights (Dewing 91). Nevertheless, others like Richard Karp maintained that the AFT was nothing more than a conservative wolf in liberal sheep’s clothing (75). He states, “…the teachers’ union had always before depended on the Board of Education to block reforms, while blandly garbing itself in a cloak of liberal idealism.” Karp, writing before the citywide strikes and the full weight of the incident, Karp demonstrates the extant anti-union sentiment.

Karp portrays the anti-decentralization stance of the union, but the union was not necessarily opposed to decentralization. According to Eugene Kimble in “Ocean Hill-Brownsville,” the AFT was in favor of decentralization and worked with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community to make sure it went smoothly (34). Kemble, a union spokesperson writing in the United Teacher, the AFT’s official publication was speaking on the issue of community control in 1967. In an ironic ending to his essay, Kemble writes, “What turns the degree of cooperation between parents, teachers, and community people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville will take remains to be seen. It does appear that the peak of resistance and hostility has been reached and passed” (51). Unfortunately for Kemble and the community, they had not reached the summit, and the arduous climb had only begun.

While Gittell noted that no one understood fully the implications of community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the plan to create the district was itself controversial.

---

5 Karp’s and Kimble’s pieces both demonstrate feelings on the issue prior to the strikes and the more vitriolic language used by both sides as the confrontation escalated. Readers should consult their articles for a more comprehensive and primary explanation of their respective viewpoints.
Initially, the plan only encompassed one school, not a separate district. Rhody McCoy, the unit administrator in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district, under the initial plan was the principal of the school (Kemble 37). Once the plan expanded to become a small experimental district in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Rhody McCoy became the superintendent or unit administrator of this district. Kemble points to the vagaries in administration and execution of its procedures and rules of selection of personnel (38) as evidence of the confusion surrounding the plan. For example, although teachers made suggestions on how to improve the plan, officials implementing the plan, like Rhody McCoy, often ignored teacher input. In addition, someone changed the plan and rewrote it, but no one seemed to know why or by whom (38). To cynics of the plan, McCoy embodied the essence of what was wrong with the centralized Board of Education. As community members had lamented the power of the Board and its ability seemingly to hire and fire personnel capriciously, now Rhody McCoy was making the same whimsical decisions about personnel with no input from teachers and little explanation as to his motives. As the situation progressed, McCoy became the rival of the union.

If Rhody McCoy was the union’s rival, its champion was Albert Shanker. According to Richard Kahlenberg, Albert Shanker was head of the AFT in New York at the time of the strike. Shanker believed in progressivism and was an anti-separationist. As I have argued earlier, community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville stemmed from the Black Power Movement, and Black Power advocates believed that equality in schooling was only possible if black communities separated themselves from the white community. Because of this desire to separate, Shanker and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community landed on opposite sides of the issue. Not only did Shanker openly oppose community control, he also opposed decentralization. He and the union successfully blocked a bill in the New York state legislature that called for strong measures of decentralization (Karp 75).

---

6 Many sources mention Shanker like Karp, Gittell, and Berube. McCoy also wrote articles and press releases. See McCoy’s “Year of the Dragon” in Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Karp’s “School Decentralization in New York” in the same text. Richard Kahlenberg, who writes about schools and unions, has written a biography of Shanker, Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battle Over School, Unions, Race and Democracy. There is even an Albert Shanker institute. Their website states that they are dedicated to, “children's education, unions as advocates for quality, and freedom of association in the public life of democracies.”
During the conflict, some accused the union and Shanker of racist tactics and racist rhetoric. “Scab Teachers,” Sol Stern’s 1968 article in Ramparts, argues that the union strike was indeed racist. He rhetorically asks, “In any event, could a ‘racist strike’ be supported by such people as A. Phillip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Michael Harrington? It could and was” (179). History has not supported the idea, however, that Shanker was racist. Indeed, Shanker established a program that allowed paraprofessionals to earn high school diplomas and even go back to college. His program helped blacks and other minorities because most of the paraprofessionals were disenfranchised members of society (Kahlenberg 4). By 1997, the year of Shanker’s death, his program had helped 8000 people, making it the largest source of minority teachers in New York City (Kahlenberg 4).

Not surprisingly, the larger part of the Jewish community sided with the AFT; after all, most of the teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville had been Jewish. In “One Year Later” Alfred Grommon quotes a Rabbi representing the Board of Rabbis in New York that the experimental district would “bring not just decentralization but also disintegration…[and] destroy quality education, the merit system in the teaching profession, ultimately, the public school system itself” (458). This statement implies that the proponents of community control valued the primacy of one’s racial or cultural identity over the merit system. The Rabbi’s comments reveal a reverse discrimination inherent in community control at Ocean Hill-Brownsville; race became the deciding factor instead of, say, individual ability. The use of race is an ironic fact, especially for Jews. On one hand, community control advocates accused the AFT and by association, the Jewish population of racism; yet, race is the critical factor in the concept of decentralization and community control. On the other hand, as Jerald Podair claims in “The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York’s Antigone,” Jews had a racial ambivalence (13); to lump Jews into the category of “white” is too simplistic. Throughout the 1940’s, 1950’s, and early 1960’s, New York Jews had dual citizenship in both white and non-white identities (13). Podair continues by exclaiming that Jews completed their journey to “unambiguous white identity” (13). This assertion too, is an oversimplification. Who says Jews were white or that they had indeed completed this journey? Podair cites an article in the black cultural journal Liberator that states, “For
ultimately, in the American context, he [i.e., a Jew] is a white man, no more, no less” (13). It was certainly a convenient proclamation that Jews were now “white.” Painting Jews as white decomplexifies the issue and turns it into one simply about race--obviating the Jewish concerns about the meritocracy system based on individual ability.

Yet, as Gary Gerstle argues, Jews and blacks may never have been united under a common liberalism (580). In “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus” Gerstle maintains that the perceived liberal alliance between northern blacks and whites was merely an illusion (581). If this is the case, then Podair’s claim that Jews had completed an “unambiguous journey” to whiteness is suspicious. If Jews and blacks did not start out under the same liberalism then it is logical to assume that their racial identities where not as closely aligned as Podair and others imply. The difference between Jewish and black racial identity poses another problem. If the two were never part of a common liberalism, then perhaps there is no schism of which to speak. Yet, I argue that simply because their racial identities were not closely aligned, they could still share some of the same goals of liberalism—a fact that Gerstle points out when he considers the black and white alliance in the 1964 and 1965 civil rights laws (580). Therefore, while black and Jewish racial identities were certainly distinct, their ultimate goals were generally associated with New Deal liberalism.

As the Rabbi demonstrates, meritocracy was at the heart of the pro-union, Jewish supported position. Nicholas Lemann writes in The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, that Michael Young, a British politician, first coined the term “meritocracy” in 1958 as the title to a fictitious PhD dissertation (117). The newness of the word in 1968 probably helps explain why many use the words “merit system” or “merit-based system” instead of meritocracy. Paradoxically, Young thought the idea of a meritocracy deplorable and lamented the advent of meritocracy as it supplanted the old aristocracy. The American usage of meritocracy is arguably more innocuous and the concept of meritocracy is integral to our culture. In The American Dream and the Power of Wealth, Heather Johnson ties meritocracy to the American dream (20). A meritocracy posits that people get ahead or behind in life based on what they have accomplished or not accomplished. It does not account for circumstances into which someone is born (20). As I have previously mentioned, social mobility was also a central matter for the people
of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. In this context, social mobility translates as entrée into the American dream. Yet, meritocracy justifies social inequality by the meritocratic process (Johnson 21). As long as there exists some form of social hierarchy, which is crucial to meritocracy, inequality will exist. Meritocracy, however, justifies this inequality of outcomes by claiming an equality of opportunity (21). In addition, at the intersection of the meritocracy system and the American dream lies the great equalizer, education. The Jewish community’s celebration of meritocracy is an endorsement of education as the guarantor that one’s background does not define forever one’s achievements or failures. By erasing race from the equation, Jew and pro-union backers attempted to achieve discursive control over the debate.

Part of the problem for the Jewish community and the black community is that the American version of meritocracy did not function as a true meritocracy. The smooth functioning of a meritocracy requires that society be, if not completely, nearly completely absent of any ills (like discrimination or racism) that would inhibit equality of opportunity. In this sense, it is not meritocracy as a theoretical ideal that many of the community control and decentralization advocates disliked; rather, they were unhappy with the social circumstances underlying the American meritocracy. These critics understood that there was not equality of opportunity in the United States and therefore, the Jewish community’s claim about preserving the meritocracy was specious. There are many critics covering a wide range of disciplines like: Marilyn Gittell, Christopher Lasch and Nicholas Lemann that are critical of the meritocracy. In Revolt of the Elites and The Betrayal of Democracy, Lasch claims that a meritocracy has no memory or allegiance to the past (42) while Lemann’s central argument is that not everyone has access to the meritocracy in the education system and therefore, an equal educational opportunity.

Preservation of the meritocratic system was not the only justification of the AFT. They had other, more pedagogical and contractual arguments as well. As Lee Shulman notes in Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals, Dewey believed that theory should take precedence over practice and that advancement in theory should control the “conditions of practice” (521). Essentially, this point was one argument of the union. If we define “practice” as the art of teaching and recognize education professionals and researchers as the creators of theory, then the union was stating that teachers held the
theoretical high ground and community members had no claim to superior theoretical or practical knowledge.

Additionally, the AFT regarded the issue as one of job security, the integrity and legality of the contract, due process and insisted that the contract applied to every school in the system (Grommon 459). The “Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the Right to Teach” in their 1968 advertisement, “The Freedom to Teach” articulated this view by stating…“Decentralization is not the issue. Decentralization of the city school is under way…The Real issue now is job security. It is the right not to be fired arbitrarily by your employer because he doesn’t like the color of your skin, or the way you wear your hair, or the political opinions you hold” (120). Further, the AFT did not view this controversy as an isolated event (121). Community control threatened their very existence and all of its secured rights. If the local Ocean Hill-Brownsville board run by Rhody McCoy could seem arbitrarily to fire personnel with no explanation, what was to stop other boards in future decentralized districts from committing the same egregious act? Lynn Davies built on this argument in her article “Possibilities and Limits for Democratisation in Education.” She explains how decentralization can lead to isolation, polarization, and ultimately tension, creating a situation where localities can have near exclusive rule, which can lead to de-standardization and provincialism (259). The Ad Hoc committee concludes its advertisement by stating, “It would indeed be sad if…the actions of the local board drove their honest critics into the reactionary camp of ‘law and order.’ All of us, in this fearful year, must fight that” (136). A reactionary camp, however, is exactly what resulted as each side entrenched into its polarized rhetoric of “law and order.”

Professionalism became a rallying cry for the AFT and to a lesser degree, the Jewish community. In Professionalization, Vollmer and Mills define profession as “any group of persons practicing a specialized skill. It is based on any intellectual study and training whose purpose is to supply people with their skill for a fee or salary” (4). With roots in the nineteenth century (3), professionalism began as an innocuous term and method to raise the level of standards, requirements, and honorable conduct of its members. Today, professionalism is a more encompassing term and has more connotations. In fact, through globalization, many industries are professionalizing in an effort to maintain their validity and relevance. For example, in “Cleaners and the Dirty
Work of Neoliberalism” Andrew Herod portrays the experience of how cleaners in hotels and motels around the world are forming professional organizations. During 1968, however, professional organizations were present in fewer industries.

Shulman argues that professionalism has technical and moral underpinnings (515-16). The teachers and community of Ocean Hill-Brownsville were no exception. The technical underpinnings promised acquisition of competent performance and skills. The moral promised adherence to certain social ends. Professionalism then, demanded high levels of knowledge and, therefore, a high level of self-governance (516). Self-governance, however, can imply that others are not capable of judging a particular profession. The AFT felt that their teachers, and to some extent the central Board of Education, had a superior theoretical knowledge that better equipped them to make decisions about schools. The community of Ocean Hill-Brownsville did not possess this theoretical knowledge; therefore, they were supposedly ill-equipped to aver policies about education. Through acquisition of such rarefied knowledge, teachers everywhere enjoyed more autonomy and thus were less beholden to exterior forces (Popkewitz 18).

Popkewitz continues by stating that through higher education, teachers learned new “civilized” practices that became the primary influences for shaping children—replacing the family and community. As a result, teachers in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community believed fully in the idea of professionalism, and their enrollment in and endorsement of the AFT confirmed this belief.

Finally, the polarized rhetoric of those involved depicts the manner in which people can sometimes lose perspective and feel very passionate about their viewpoint. Either you were on the side of community control and decentralization, or you were for the union. There was no middle ground for anyone involved, and as the confrontation spiraled into a national issue, the stark contrast and unwillingness to compromise on each side of the issue mirrored the deep schism occurring in American liberalism. Perhaps Gittell did not recognize the profundity of her own prophetic words. I contend, as the cleavage between the warring parties crystallized, so too did the split in American

---

7 The professionalization of cleaners is the subject of the entire article. He mentions it throughout his piece and notes how this same phenomenon is occurring in other industries.
8 I am referring here to my previous mentioning of Gittell’s statement that no one grasped fully the implications of the strike.
liberalism. Gone was the alliance of organized labor and civil rights, Jews and Blacks. Shanker and the union were now conservatives, though of a liberal breed, and the civil rights movement became the radical left. The media microscope magnified the incident onto the national setting where the shockwaves of the event rippled through American liberalism and shook its very core. From this shakedown emerged the new liberal order.
Marilyn Gittell explains that community control emerged as a viable option for education reform and improving student achievement during the 1960’s (“Decentralization” 672). As cries for community control grew, advocates of the policy increasingly viewed traditional education leaders and school board members as disconnected from the needs of the community. Gittell and others felt that community control was the best way to implement decentralization in the nation’s schools (673).

While community control and decentralization are not necessarily the same thing, in the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville, these two concepts were practically inseparable. It is also important to understand that community control and decentralization were issues in direct contrast to professionalism and meritocracy. In its simplest form, the controversy centered on the struggle between these two sets of competing ideas—community control and decentralization versus professionalism and meritocracy. As I have already mentioned, the idea of meritocracy was not the issue for advocates of community control and decentralization; rather, they understood that a meritocracy during the sixties, a decade rife with civil rights reform and violations, was not a feasible option. One the other hand, the Jewish community and those supporting professionalism and meritocracy, believed that decentralization and community control would only lead to greater disintegration.

In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, blacks claimed that Jewish domination of the school system created and enforced a pedagogical system where teachers were uninformed about the needs of their students (672). Additionally, endorsing community control meant an endorsement of the education system’s ability to assuage the inimical effects of one’s socioeconomic background on educational achievement (Gittell “Community” 61). Instead, it accounts for one’s background but also stresses the significance of education as a vehicle for social mobility. Gittell’s assessment of community control begs the question, if it is not the socioeconomic background of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville

---

9 Gittell’s articles, “Community Control of Education” and “Decentralization and Citizen Participation in Education” are both useful tools explaining the process and background of community control.
students that causes them to fail then, what is it? According to Gittell, the failure lays with the teachers and their disconnection from the community. The union is not as clear on the issue of student failure.

Because of the disconnection between teacher and student, community control sought to redistribute power within the school system from the professionals and bureaucrats to the community. Nevertheless, Gittell claims in “Decentralization and Citizen Participation in Education” that Ocean Hill-Brownsville was more symptomatic of reform than revolution (675). Here, Gittell is hinting at an issue I previously raised—the lack of a community control and decentralization advocates to construct a curriculum. Based on the above statement by Gittell, I assume that community control was less about curriculum development and more about incorporating community members into the classroom. Perhaps this seemingly simple act might have been enough to encourage students in Ocean Hill-Brownsville to perform. Yet, Gittell and others needed to more clearly define their movement or experiment in community control. It is as if the movement was so grandiose, with its noble overtones of equality and civil rights, that the campaigners of the movement left out some crucial details. I am not saying that community control and decentralization needed strict curriculum guidelines in order to successfully persuade the public of their importance; however, a more explicit mentioning of what these new community teachers would be teaching in the classroom might have helped the experiment in community control.

Similarly, these same proponents wanted to change the system from within, not abolish it only to replace it with another radical system. McCoy offers a similar view when he frames the issue as an historical problem and community control as an effective instrument to deal with the inequality (53). For McCoy, community control was a “partnership in education, one that incorporates community involvement” instead of excluding teachers. Kahlenberg claims that McCoy wanted an all black teaching force (2) and McCoy did admit that he would have liked that development. An all-black teaching force, however, was only demonstrative of the “community involvement” of which McCoy spoke. Indeed, if the community is nearly 80 per cent black, then having mostly black teachers would make sense.
Supporters also claimed that community control led to democratic, participatory reform. A pluralist society depends, in part, on participation. The closed political system of education, according to Gittell, embodied in the central Board of Education denied the participatory ideal of a pluralistic, democratic system (“Community” 62). Thus, Ocean Hill-Brownsville community members were revolting against their exclusion from the system. According to Popkewitz, this exclusion had occurred one hundred years ago in the name of professionalization (19). Yet, as Popkewitz also notes, even participatory desires (in this case of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community) stem from discourses about participation (19) such as Gittell’s comments on community control. Popkewitz’s claim suggests that community control might not be a grassroots movement; instead, it might depend on the informed voice of “professionals” like Gittell herself. Still, proponents of the plan, regardless of their professional or layperson status, argued that decentralization was democratization. The process ushers in participation and inclusiveness, which are basic tenets of democracy (Davies 258). The due process argument also played against the idea of participation. The AFT claimed due process as the focal point of the argument. According to Berube and Gittell, the due process issue was already a volatile topic (33). By asserting due process at the center of the debate, the AFT successfully moved the discourse surrounding the debate away from democracy and participation. Understandably, a debate over democracy and participation, with such lofty ideals associated with them, could garner more interest from the community than could a debate concerning due process. In one sense, it was in the AFT’s best interest to make the issue mundane because doing so could drive away community interest—and community interest led to community involvement and control.

One blow against community control advocates was their lack of organization. McCoy admits that he and his followers were not as organized as the AFT. On the other hand, the AFT had selected personnel who gave public speeches about the ongoing strike (McCoy 59). Whereas the AFT had designated spokespeople, McCoy and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community allowed comments from anyone able and willing. Such latitude meant that information was, at times, contradictory and possibly overwhelming. The multitude of viewpoints had the possibility of crowding out a unified, coherent message on behalf of community control supporters. Still, McCoy felt this diversity was a positive
because he believed this input led to more sincerity (McCoy 59). With a united message, however, the AFT as demonstrated in the above example of discursive control of due process versus democratic participation, sometimes outmaneuvered the community control movement. As Nat Hentoff explains in his playfully titled article, “Ad Hoc Committee on Confusion,” by alleging the issue is solely about the right to teach and job security, the AFT is ignoring the entire context of the issue (123). While this might have been true, the nimble AFT again out-maneuvered the dawdling community control group.

For each argument the AFT proposed, supporters of community control and decentralization had a counter argument, and vice versa. Take for example, the idea of the teacher as an expert of theoretical knowledge as paramount to the layperson’s common, practical knowledge. Previously, I mentioned that the AFT felt that teachers and education professionals, with their expertise, should manage schools. Academic knowledge, as I argue, predicated notions of teacher expertise in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in the eyes of the union. Community members, however, argued that academic knowledge or training is necessary only for the license to practice and not necessarily for practice. As Shulman eloquently affirms, “…in spite of Dewey’s assumptions and argument, a false claim. It may well be that academic knowledge is essential only as an entitlement to practice and is not functionally necessary for practice” (517). This argument means that the license to practice is meaningless--that it is merely a formality with little practical application. Yet, who has the authority to say this? Who has the knowledge base to make this declaration? A professional? A theoretician? A layperson? Ironically, it requires a certain amount of knowledge about education theory (Dewey), and history (à la Popkewitz and Dewey) for the imprimatur to declare theory impractical. On the other hand, there should be some local control. The scholar Len Sperry paraphrases James B. Conant when he says, “Conant’s report echoes the typical recommendation that school boards should…refrain from interfering with curricular development” (143). What exactly is the job of a school board if it is not to play a role in curriculum development? To be clear, the AFT did not maintain that school boards should refrain from “interfering with curriculum development.” The AFT was, however, part of the professional regime.
Professionalism was at the heart of the AFT’s elitism and the source of great anger for community control backers. These backers saw professionalism as a veil behind which the union hid its real agenda of discrimination and preservation of the status quo. As Gittell exclaims, “professionalism is the panacea developed to replace political or public decision making” (“Community” 67). Not only did community control threaten the job security of Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers, it also challenged the very nature of the education profession and the professionalization of education. If a highly localized school board ruled supreme, the educators’ expert knowledge was beholden to their unprofessional knowledge—gone was the supremacy of the professional. Gittell sees bureaucratization, centralization, and specialization as part of professionalism (“Community” 60). Further, these elements all function as oppressive agents in the urban political structure where the school system is the battleground. Unfortunately for Gittell and her compatriots, the battleground represented the political structure that the union had helped to create and perpetuate.

Gittell was not the only person critical of professionalism. McCoy also criticized the phenomenon as a barrier to achieving community control. McCoy states that the professional organization, the AFT, placed its fate in the college and university but that the elites of the college and university did not act as an instrument of change. Instead, it “retained its ivory tower status. It waited for the community to come to its knees for help” (55). While McCoy is articulating similar modes of thought as Gittell and some of his contemporaries, he also presages future scholars like Lasch. In this sense, McCoy offers the touchstone of Lasch’s argument that elites, or professionals in many cases, have rebelled against proletarian society. Professionals have receded into their own professionalism. They are a new elite breed; ensconced in their erudite cloaks of knowledge, they disdain to interact with the plebeians.

For critics of professionalism, the professionals’ revolt was as snobby as it was a power play. Gittell believed that the desire of “inbred bureaucrats”’ desire to hold power in a centralized bureaucracy is stronger than their desire to help children (“Community” 62). This is not to say that the “inbred bureaucrats” in the centralized Board of Education

---

10 As I will show more clearly in my conclusion, Lasch’s ideas were helpful in framing my argument about professionals and the change in liberalism. Lasch speaks at length about neighborhoods and professionals (elites) and discusses many tenets central to liberalism.
did not care for children; however, once the intoxicating elixir wetted their lips, they did not want to lose their power. Vollmer and Mills noted this trend when they explicated that members of professional associations become very attached to those association and that this attachment has important consequences to those associations and their membership (3). Members of the profession can become overly protective of their association or organization, and in some cases the organization can exist only to serve its own existence and lose sight of its original vision. For the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, the AFT had lost its original message and only existed to serve itself, not the students. The bureaucratic Board of Education, like the AFT an embodiment of professionalism, mirrored this self-serving existence.

Another target of the community control group was the idea of meritocracy. For the AFT, meritocracy was the “great equalizer” and justified inequality of outcomes by an equality of opportunity. Education is supposed to level the playing field, keeping one’s socioeconomic background from playing a role in success. For members of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, this idea was shortsighted. How could the Jewish community and the AFT claim equality of opportunity when students in Ocean Hill-Brownsville had sub-par facilities, struggled with segregation, not to mention the denial of access to a wealth of information because of the color of their skin? Moreover, the merit system was simply a euphemism for professionalism. The merit system only measures one’s desire or ability to professional standards instead of actual performance. According to Gittell, this is especially true for principals because one cannot measure the qualities of effective principals in written examinations (“De centralization” 679). Gittell’s assessment is only partially true, especially if writing is, indeed, a skill that principals would need. Second, it is quite a large assumption that written exams cannot measure the skills required for teachers or principals. To be fair, Gittell is quoting a judge; however, she is using his words to bolster her argument for community control and does not impugn the assumption the judge makes. Nevertheless, we understand Gittell’s point: that (aside from writing perhaps) assessment of effective principals is much more likely to be successful through observation and, say, teacher feedback than through a written exam.
In a strange sense, meritocracy and community control had at least one element in common. Both fundamentally believed in education’s ability to preclude socioeconomic status as a significant factor in educational achievement. Johnson explains that the American dream reinforces meritocracy and personal responsibility by bombarding society with the idea that one’s station and status in life is a direct and exclusive result of his or her own action (23). Supporters of community control must have partially believed in this notion; otherwise, why would they place so much faith in the education system? As I mentioned earlier, Gittell says that community control mitigates if not eliminates socioeconomic limitations. She implies that under community control, students are free to excel to their natural potential. From this perspective, both community control and meritocracy shun socioeconomic background as a determinant of success in school.

From another perspective, one could argue that the black community in Ocean Hill-Brownsville believed in meritocracy. If so, then their attempt at community control should not have been surprising. As I have mentioned above, inscribed into meritocracy is the notion of personal responsibility. The black community wanted to change their circumstances; therefore, their attempt at community control was an attempt to assume responsibility, seize the initiative, and change their circumstances. Of course, this is not the type of responsibility the critics of community control had in mind when they cited meritocracy as a way of preserving the status quo. Nonetheless, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community believed in meritocracy as much as the Jewish community; however, they were not so naïve as to think equality of opportunity existed. Schools then, were not the great equalizers but the very site of inequality. If a racially unbiased meritocracy requires equality of opportunity, then black schools, Jewish schools and white schools needed to be commensurate.

Unfortunately, some members of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community helped shift the focus away from the issues and onto race. This is not to say that race should have been ignored; quite the contrary. Spouting racial obloquies, however, was a regrettable side effect of the teachers’ strike. On Julius Lester’s talk radio show, he read a poem on air that stated, “Hey Jew boy with that Yarmulke on your head, Hey Jew boy I wish you were dead” (Weiss 2). Lester did not write the poem; an Ocean Hill-Brownsville student did (later in life, Lester converted to Judaism). While deplorable, this
poem depicts the extreme unhappiness in the black community over Jewish control of the schools. The vituperate language echoed the disillusionment with the dream of integration as it faded into cynicism about the forwardness of white society. Still, reading this poem only served to inflame the Jewish community, which responded with their own brand of racial, subversive tactics. In what many claim was an attempt to inflame Jewish sentiments about blacks, someone (no one knows) placed a flier with racial epithets about whites in teachers’ mailboxes at two schools in Brooklyn.¹¹

According to Berube and Gittell, while the school became the agent to transform the ghetto into a viable community, the competing forces in the arena of social justice had shifted away from labor and toward race as their focal point. The union, however, still operated as if it had been 1930 (4-5). As the saliency of organized labor seemed to wane, liberalism’s split solidified. Yet, if Ocean Hill-Brownsville teaches us anything, it is that organized labor and its undertone of professionalism held significant political and cultural power.

¹¹ Readers interested in the exact wording of the flier should consult the “Documents, Hate Literature” section of Berube and Gittell’s Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville.
CHAPTER 5: “INTEGRATIONIST LIBERALISM”¹² VERSUS SEPARATISM

There are many implications of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers’ strike. Yet those involved underestimated the magnitude of the incident and their role in it. In an ironic statement, McCoy avers, “We will become faceless, unheralded, and unrepresented in a new milieu of educational change, but we will know in our hearts that our action, determination, and commitment, born of our right to be human beings and citizens in this great society, will not have been in vain” (63). Few could have envisioned the issues that Ocean Hill-Brownsville precipitated or understood its historical significance to the evolution of liberalism in America. Gittell maintained that Ocean Hill-Brownsville was not altogether revolutionary. As evidence, she claims that its policies did not advocate integration and did not offer citywide reform (“Decentralization” 676). Nevertheless, retrospect allows scholars to decode the cultural, social, political, and economic ancestors of a past event. The forty years since Ocean Hill-Brownsville have enmeshed the controversy in the complex and connected layers of society, which makes it harder to understand the significance of the event; however, if we can distill the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville through critical evaluation, we can gain insights into a host of contemporary issues.

I am not the only scholar, of course, who has conducted this historicizing of the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Richard Kahlenberg situates the issue and the key figures under the context of the change in American liberalism. Moreover, through his examination, we understand the issue as more than a black and white issue. He helps us understand that those writing of the controversy during the event often missed the function of the incident’s significance to liberalism. As McCoy’s statement demonstrates, he believed that those involved would disappear into the cultural legacy, yet Kahlenberg resurrects the issue and the various people involved in the issue to convey their cultural significance. I seek now to build upon Kahlenberg’s thesis that Ocean Hill-Brownsville catalyzed a change in American liberalism and demonstrate that the incident helped redefine professionalism.

¹² I am borrowing this phrase from Jumonville. He speaks of the “old integrationist liberalism” which implies that there is a new, perhaps non-integrationist liberalism (342).
First, we need to understand how Ocean Hill-Brownsville changed liberalism. Part of this understanding relates to Popkewitz’s idea about progress. Not only did progress transform education into a “savior” of the student’s soul; progress itself is also part of the tradition of liberalism. Lasch notes that progress is part of the liberal American tradition. The pursuit of equal opportunity, confidence in the welfare state and a hatred of war are part of the march of progress toward a liberal utopia (148). Thus, those vying for equality of opportunity through community control were part of the larger tradition of progress in the name of liberalism. Nevertheless, there were competing ideas about the foundations, or new foundations, of liberalism. While supporters of the AFT sought a construction of liberalism upon class to the exclusion of race, black activists attempted to construct liberalism with racial identity at its core (Podair 2). Further, the rift in liberalism also revived a debate, an unresolved debate, about liberalism’s basic unit of measure—the individual or the group (Podair 3). While meritocracy favored the individual as the supreme agent of learning, obviously community control celebrated the group prior to the individual. This debate highlighted the struggle of the competing notions of individual versus the group, black versus Jewish, class versus race. As the warring parties raged on, they only concretized the divide to redefine liberalism.

As Samuel Freedman explains in “Quiet Riot,” the collapse of black-Jewish relations served as a national narrative for Jewish estrangement from traditional or New Deal liberalism (2). Identity politics supplanted class-based politics, and many liberals did not like the idea of a liberalism based on race. As the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville spawned a new strain of liberalism, those denying this strain of liberalism became ideological refugees. To these refugees, race-based liberalism was an unsuitable philosophy and they turned to other philosophies, such as neoliberalism, as their ideological home. While I believe that neoliberalism can trace some of its origins to this period, I should note that no one used the term neoliberal during the late 60’s. Thus, any use of the term to describe the event is my own.

Podair draws the conclusion that liberalism failed blacks and whites more than they failed liberalism: “…Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s legacy is an ideologically fragmented public culture without the capacity to inspire and unify. In the end, black and white New Yorkers did not fail liberalism as much as it failed them” (“Justice” 3). Here,
Podair’s conclusion is inaccurate. The implication is that liberalism is somehow not comprehensive enough, or ideologically welcoming enough to include both blacks and whites. Should it not be up to blacks and whites to find common ground in the framework of liberalism on which they can agree? It is easier to say we cannot compromise, there is no middle ground, and liberalism has failed us—much the same way both the AFT and community control advocates failed to find common ground and resulted to using rhetoric of polarization. Harder, yet nobler, is the ability to find a common ground, to work together and forge a liberalism that encompasses both black and white paradigms. Ideas do not fail people, especially an idea as grand and dignified as liberalism; people fail ideas. In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, liberalism did not fail people, people failed to grasp its pluralistic quality.

The changing nature of liberalism was not the only outcome of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville incident. The confrontation also produced a divide in the Democratic Party (Kahlenberg qtd. in Treiman 5). Prior to the strike, the Democratic Party claimed the allegiance of both the working class and minorities. The strike, however, exacerbated racial tensions and drove many in the working class away from the Democrats and to the Republicans. Moreover, because race became a more controversial topic, race became a deciding factor in more elections. Thus, not only was race moving former members of the Democratic Party to the Republicans, it was also becoming the focus of more elections, thereby making race the most important issue—above organized labor and other issues (5). Of course, Ocean Hill-Brownsville was not the only factor in the white flight from the Democratic Party. According to Frank Brown in “Nixon’s ‘Southern Strategy’ and Forces Against Brown,” Richard Nixon began the strategy to win white votes in the south because he knew that racial identity more than anything else influenced voters in the south (192). 13 Nevertheless, combined with Nixon’s policies, Ocean Hill-Brownsville played an integral role in changing the constituency of the Democratic Party.

Though the Ocean Hill-Brownsville incident was not the creator of neoliberalism, it certainly strengthened its momentum. I use neoliberalism as defined in the article by Wells et al. Neoliberalism is, “free-market policies that encourage private enterprise and

---

13 Brown’s article historicizes the evolution of the ‘southern strategy’ and demonstrates how we can implement certain policies to enact the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown.
consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative and undermine government’s incompetent bureaucracy” (343). Boss and Gans-Morse attempt to demystify neoliberalism explain in their article, “From Rallying Cry to Whipping Boy: The Concept of Neoliberalism in the Study of Development”.¹⁴ I use the term to demonstrate that the change in “integrationist liberalism” liberalism in Ocean Hill-Brownsville is symptomatic of the now, well-known neoliberal movement. Applying neoliberalism to those actors in Ocean Hill-Brownsville might be anachronistic. I mean only to show that those trading in the old liberalism for their new brand loosely conform to the modern use of neoliberalism.

Because Ocean Hill-Brownsville has had weighty implications for professionalism, I use the confrontation to demonstrate that along with Ocean Hill-Brownsville itself, neoliberalism has led to greater professionalization. In his article, Herod demonstrates that professionalism has permeated many industries--some industries, like the cleaning industry that seem at first glance, non-professions (2-3). Ocean Hill-Brownsville is an incipient example of this trend. Because the union ultimately succeeded, it serves as an example of professionalism’s expansion and ability to take precedence over other issues--in this case, the community control issue. The confrontation stands as an early example in the life of neoliberalism where professionalism triumphed over civil rights. Beland notes that during the twentieth century, the state granted new economic rights based on economic security (30), and unions were certainly part of this process. Even though the state also granted new civil liberties, in Ocean Hill-Brownsville the AFT’s claim to economic rights trumped that of the community control advocates’ attempt at equality of opportunity. In this manner, economic rights superseded civil rights.

Prior to Ocean Hill-Brownsville, liberalism’s purview meant securing rights for minorities or disenfranchised groups (Wells et al. 342). After, the backlash against big government and to a certain extent, civil rights, liberalism’s ability as a promoter of civil rights, democracy and equality of opportunity declined. Further, as Ocean Hill-Brownsville demonstrates, equality of opportunity did not exist. Therefore, privileged

¹⁴ Their article is especially useful in explaining the origins and evolution of neoliberalism in the scholarly context. Readers interested in a more comprehensive explanation of neoliberalism should consult their article.
members of society had greater access to resources that allowed them to compete more
effectively than non-privileged members. When Gittell asserted that the new focal point
of liberalism was race and not organized labor, she was only half-right. For the New Deal
liberals, of which she was a part, liberalism was about securing rights for racial
minorities; yet, the new concept of liberalism replaced this attitude with their discourse of
securing economic rights.

Even though Ocean Hill-Brownsville precipitated a change in liberalism, the
conflict cloaked a latent ideological divide. Gerstle comments on the illusory nature of
liberalism and implies that, while there might have been a fleeting or loose consensus,
there were deep ideological divides (580). Podair claims that the white view of liberalism
was too idealistic in that it ignored obvious racial problems. Likewise, he explains that
the black conception of liberalism centered too much on racial essentialism (“Justice” 2).
Each of these perspectives consisted of “ideological dead-ends” (2), and from the gap
between these two competing ideologies, neoliberalism arose.

While the AFT represented professionalism and a tendency to move industries
toward professionalism, years later teachers’ unions represent an opposing force to
neoliberalism. After the strike, Albert Shanker became president of the AFT and led
efforts against privatization in education—efforts that are a hallmark of neoliberalism
(Treiman 1). Not only did Shanker provide the political muscle needed to check
privatization efforts, he also was a visionary and helped foster public school reform
(Kahlenberg qtd in Treiman 3). In fact, teachers’ unions are the strongest element against
privatization in education and Shanker is largely responsible for this. Kahlenberg argues
that teachers’ unions stand at the intersection “of the two great movements for more
equality and social mobility in this country: public education on the one hand, and trade
unions on the other” (qtd in Treiman 3). Considering Kahlenberg’s statement, it is ironic
that community control backers accused the AFT of obstructing the social mobility of the
Ocean Hill-Brownsville community and precluding equality of opportunity through
professionalism. In addition, the AFT’s emphasis on job security as the main issue places
the AFT under the context of neoliberalism. This placement is because, generally
speaking, neoliberalism shifts human focus from civil rights to making money. The
primary concern of the citizen becomes financial gain (Saltman 4) instead of concern for
human or civil rights. Thus, the union’s priority on job security and salaries demonstrates their concern for neoliberal policies over classically liberal policies.

As Margaret Levi contends in her 2003 article, “Organizing Power: The Prospects for an American Labor Movement,” Labor Unions are an instrument for social justice, wage compensation, improved working conditions, and protection against discrimination, to the community of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, however, the AFT hardly seemed an instrument of social justice. I argue that in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the AFT was not an instrument of social justice. In this case, the labor union functioned more like an instrument against liberalism. This phenomenon might be because some of the traditional forces of economics do not affect teachers’ unions. Lieberman points out this pattern in his book, The teacher unions: how they sabotage educational reform and why, when he explains how outsourcing (a byproduct of neoliberal globalization policies) does not affect the NEA and the AFT. Situating labor unions as antithetical to New Deal liberalism rather than against it, has important consequences in scholarly research that grapples with the function of labor unions under an increasingly globalizing society. As the confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville demonstrates, scholars need to reassess the relationship of labor unions, more specifically the teachers’ union, to changing concepts of liberalism and the globalized world.

As I have been showing, Ocean Hill-Brownsville raises basic questions about democracy. Lauder argues that “market choice replaces democratic participation as the “touchstone of human freedom” (422). Community control, however, valued participation as a central element of education and the democratization of students. Further, for communities like Ocean Hill-Brownsville, already deprived of economic privileges, now these same communities also have little access to democratic participation as a means to acquire social mobility. This is in part because of the American system of meritocracy. The system presupposes conditions that do not exist. It assumes that everyone has equality of opportunity. Yet by its very assumption of ensured equality of opportunity, it denies that which it assumes because it makes no effort to ensure equality of opportunity in the first place—it simply believes it already exists. The

---

15 Levi’s article is useful in explaining the modern ability of labor unions to facilitate social justice. She does not speak about Ocean Hill-Brownsville specifically.
consequences for education are dire, especially for disenfranchised neighborhoods like Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Already excluded, these neighborhoods, as Lasch notes, become “repositories” of underachievers who have little chance to succeed in the beginning. Moreover, as Popkewitz outlines, “Children were to be redeemed—rescued and saved—by making them productive citizens” (10). Thus, the educative process taught children to be democratic citizens. If meritocracy denies the educative process of its democratic, participatory feature by not guaranteeing equality of opportunity, then how can that process instill democratic values in children? In the urban ghetto, children are left out of the democratic process altogether.

Lasch, when speaking about attitudes towards democracy in the first half of the nineteenth century, intimates that he agrees with their assessment that the democratic principles of “self-reliance, responsibility, initiative” are best acquired through business (7). As I discussed earlier, Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty reveals that ascribing personal responsibility and self-reliance to a group also allows one to blame that group for its failures. Nevertheless, Lasch acknowledges that “self-reliance does not mean self-sufficiency. Self-governing communities, not individuals are the basic units of democracy” (8). In his championing of communities, Lasch elucidates that communities allow individuals to help each other and not rely on the state for aid. Community control is the epitome of this idea because it seeks to implement a feeling of self-reliance through community participation in schools. If communities are the units of democracy, then self-reliance really means an interconnectedness of individuals in a community helping each other in order to make the community self-reliant. A self-reliant community, however, requires a transfer of power. As Kifner explains, Ocean Hill-Brownsville was an attempt to return power to a group of people through a local decentralized method (1). The established order meant that power flowed from the bureaucracy to the people, but community control sought to reverse this flow (1).

Along with the competing ideologies over democracy, Ocean Hill-Brownsville (as I have already mentioned) raises questions about professionalism. An early idea of

---

16 While I use Popkewitz to support my discussion as democracy as fundamentally a participatory process, I should note that Popkewitz challenges the assumption that participation is normal and natural. He claims that the current understanding and explanations of participation do not historicize the concept of participation as a European, bourgeois, gendered conception. This interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper.
professionalism was the notion of the “professional expert in service of the democratic ideal” (Popkewitz 8). Whether professionalism served the democratic ideal depends on whether community control or the union best expressed the principles of democracy. If democracy’s fundamental quality is a free-market initiative, then the union best serves democracy. On the other hand, if participation underscores democracy, then community control best expresses it. Of course, during the conflict, professionalism was most closely associated with the union and, as we have seen, it was the target of community control. It is hard to conclude that the professionals in the AFT and the central Board of Education served the ideals of democracy. Participation is integral to democracy, and neither the Board nor the AFT made room for participation as part of its policy. Professionalization had been happening for decades. In this case, the professionals doled out policy and its apparent benefits under the guise of professional expertise (Gittell “The Potential for Change” 218). Because supposedly only professionals had knowledge about policy, professionals had a monopoly on what policies were valid and the dissemination of these policies.

Another reason the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community rebelled against professionalism was that professionalization had become a tool for totally reshaping the line of authority in school administration and for weeding out those of less desirable ethnic and social origins through requirements for higher education and for instilling a sense of loyalty, not to the community, but to the school principal, superintendent, and educational professorate (Murphy qtd in Popkewitz 10). In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, this systematic exclusion translated into a traditional exclusion of minorities because of their “less than desirable” ethnic origin.

While professionalization is a legacy of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, honor is not necessarily a legacy of professionalism in teaching. Ironically, Lasch keenly points out, “We have professionalized teaching by setting up elaborate requirements for certification, but we have not succeeded in institutionalizing Mann’s appreciation of teaching as an honorable calling” (158). As Vollmer and Mills stated, people form professional associations in order to uphold and increase the standards of a profession. Has the formation of unions like the AFT raised the standards of the profession and brought honor to the field? Certainly, for the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, the answer is
no. Yet perhaps Lasch is overly critical; after all, my own experience as a middle school teacher leads me to believe it is an honorable profession—but then, my opinion of teaching as a noble profession has little to do with teachers unions. The professionals in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville fiasco had slowly yet methodically managed to ideologically and literally gerrymander the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood into a parallel and forgotten existence, where the ghetto students, subject to the almost despotic rule of the Board of Education, were not socially mobile but “borne back ceaselessly into the past” as Fitzgerald writes in closing *The Great Gatsby* (182), into the repository of exclusion called Ocean Hill-Brownsville.
CONCLUSION: RACIAL DIVISIVENESS AND THE LEGACY OF OCEAN HILL-BROWNSVILLE

The confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville marks a change in American liberalism. While the incident occurred in the summer and fall of 1968 in New York, its origins and ramifications have subsequently affected many parts of contemporary culture. From the Black Power movement and a desire to create separate schools with their own curriculum reflecting black heritage to Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s contribution to neoliberalism, it is difficult to overstate the incident’s importance to comprehending democracy in education. As we reinterpret the confrontation, we encounter new devices for understanding education in the modern era. We can more clearly understand the contentiousness of teachers’ unions, accusations of their only goal as job protection, if we view them through the historical lens of the fiasco at Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Modern critics even cite the strike as the birth of affirmative action (Kahlenberg “Ocean Hill-Brownsville”). According to scholars, like Kahlenberg, a lasting legacy of Ocean Hill-Brownsville is color-conscious hiring and firing.

Affirmative action can probably trace its lineage to Ocean Hill-Brownsville more directly than other cultural phenomena. Jumonville writes that part of the ethic of multiculturalism was “using unfairness to fight previous unfairness” and that this tactic “arose among younger liberals in the 1970’s” (342). Later, when speaking about neoconservatism, Jumonville states that liberals abandoned “color-blind” and “meritocratic approaches to race problems” (391). These two examples demonstrate that in the wake of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the liberal movement incorporated affirmative action policies into its purview. Further, the “racial essentialism” that Podair speaks of are the roots of affirmative action. Is it fair, however, to brand Ocean Hill-Brownsville as the birthplace of affirmative action? While Kahlenberg and others do suggest it created affirmative action, I do not agree—or at least I do not agree that it created the current concept of affirmative action. Currently, affirmative action is the process of hiring, firing or admitting someone based on race or ethnicity. Furthermore, much of affirmative action’s policies rely on the state or institutions to uphold racially conscious policies. Ocean Hill-Brownsville, on the other hand, relied on an organizational scheme to
promote its policy of community control. Of course, the community wanted more Black teachers, but their racial identity was more incidental than essential. For Ocean Hill-Brownsville, they wanted teachers in touch with the community’s needs and because the community was largely black, it is not surprising that black teachers (and some Puerto Rican because they were a significant minority) were the teachers who reflected this community desire.

The idea of community control is still present today in education. The school choice movement is part of this idea. Ironically, many view the school choice movement as antithetical to democracy because it does not promote integration. Brown shows that former president Reagan was against the movement when he quotes him saying, “busing that takes children out of the neighborhood schools and makes them pawns in a social experiment that nobody wants” (191). Many districts bus students from across town in order to achieve a semblance of racial mixing. In this sense, integration is more akin to affirmative action than community control because it holds racial balance as a primary ingredient in the construction of school districts and the just composition of school populations.

Ultimately, the attempt at community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville was an effort to reassert control over the community’s destiny. Decades of exclusion had left the community with little recourse. The great equalizer, education, had proven not so equalizing. Instead, it perpetuated a cycle of disenfranchisement, a cycle the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community desperately wanted to break. Community control, they felt, was their path to educational salvation. Philosophically I do not agree with community control as an educational technique because I believe it leads to isolated communities, where school populations are racially homogenous. I hold democracy as fundamentally a participatory process. I believe that participation requires interaction with people from all backgrounds (inasmuch as this participation is feasible, practical and not too cost prohibitive). School integration achieves a level of this interaction; for the most part, neighborhood schools would not and do not contain racially diverse populations of students.

I believe, more than any other issue, the history of racial divisiveness is the bane of America’s existence. It is a specter haunting our culture at every pivotal moment. As
Toni Morrison passionately explains a point about literary influence, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, on some level, all of American literature is a reflexive act in response to an “Africanist presence.”

Her idea certainly applies to society in general: the landscape of education, I contend, contains this same reflexive act to an “Africanist presence.” Acknowledged or unacknowledged, most education trends, styles, movements, and even curriculum are either a direct or indirect attempt to reconcile the past exclusion of blacks with a future bent on racial harmony. Unfortunately, as we respond with new educational measures, sometimes we recreate the cycle of exclusion instead of breaking it.

Breaking the cycle of exclusion was what community control and decentralization attempted to accomplish. Saltman points out that lurking beneath the academic curriculum surges an ideology where neoliberalism has reproduced schools as sites reflecting ideas of the free-market (3). From this perspective, schools are not objective places. They conceive of students in the image of the free-market citizen instead of the democratic one, and students inherit an idea of the primacy of capitalism over democratic participation. In his book, Lasch asks whether “democracy deserve to survive” (80) and articulates that while minority rights are part of the larger subject of democracy, there are “far more important issues confronting friends of democracy: the crisis of competence; the spread of apathy and a suffocating cynicism; the moral paralysis of openness above all” (91). Here, I disagree with Lasch. While I certainly feel those issues are integral to the cultivation of democracy and therefore education, they are not “far more important” than minority rights. Instead, our culture should hold minority rights and those issues Lasch speaks of on the same plane.

---

17 Morrison’s book deals with literature. She uses the term Africanist presence throughout her book.
REFERENCE


Durkheim, Emile. "Occupational Groups and Social Order." Professionalization.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrew Childs is a native of Gainesville, Florida. He graduated from Buchholz High School in 1996. He received his Bachelor’s degree in 2000 in English from Florida State University. After graduation, he briefly moved to Spain and then back to Florida where he taught middle school for close to four years. He received his Master’s degree in 2008 in American and Florida Studies from Florida State University. Currently, Andrew is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington where he is pursuing a degree in Geography. His expected graduation date is 2013.