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## Review: New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg

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**New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg**

Heather Lewis

New York: Teachers College Press, 2013

xii + 199 pp., \$47.95 (paper)

There have been numerous historical studies written in the past decade about the Albert Shanker–led United Federation of Teachers (UFT) strike in fall 1968 that shut down New York City’s public school system, the nation’s largest, then and now, with more than 1 million students. The conflict, according to historian Jerald Podair, was nothing less than *The Strike That Changed New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), as the title of his book boldly declared. We now know a great deal about the immediate cause of the strike—Shanker’s and the UFT’s vehement opposition to the movement for community control of largely minority schools—and what happened in the ten weeks between early September, when the strike began, and mid-November, when it ended. We know very little, however, about the long-term history of the community-control movement both before and after the UFT’s near-total victory in 1968 and the ongoing impact of community-control ideas and organizational forms on the subsequent history of New York City’s public school system. It is precisely those missing elements in this contested history that Heather Lewis sets out to address in her slim book.

Historians regularly reconsider and/or challenge standard or accepted scholarly interpretations of what happened in the past. Such reinterpretations often rely on uncovering previously unknown or underutilized historical sources. Heather Lewis’s book is a good example of the scholarly hard work of finding what has previously been hidden from view and then constructing a new interpretation, based on those newly discovered sources.

In seven short chapters, Lewis, an associate professor of urban history and education at Pratt Institute, reviews a half century of efforts to reform the New York City public schools, spanning the years from the mid-1950s to the reassertion of mayoral control of the public schools after 2002. She employs new archival sources (notably, the previously unexamined personal archives of one of the key leaders of the community-control effort in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville [OH-B] neighborhood in Brooklyn, the Reverend Herbert Oliver) as well as a slew of oral-history interviews and archival resources, which allow her to depict poor and working-class people’s efforts to transform their children’s lives by controlling their neighborhood schools. These sources allow Lewis to focus on the origins and early growth of the community-control movement that ultimately led to the UFT strike, especially the key role played by women within various community-based organizations. Lewis also recounts the powerful influence that community control continued to exercise on educational reform efforts that reshaped public school teaching and learning in some school districts in New York in the 1970s and 1980s.

Rather than present a comprehensive history of public schooling from community control to mayoral control (or as the book’s title says more alliteratively, “from Brownsville to Bloomberg”), Lewis presents a series of interlinked case studies of particular moments and particular schools, neighborhoods, and districts in the four decades she analyzes.

In the introduction, Lewis situates her study as a revisionist effort in opposition to what she calls the “currently dominant narrative” exemplified by Podair’s book (10). She quotes Podair as arguing that the OH-B experiment “severely damaged the idea of community action as an instrument of social change” and “exposed local control’s false promise of self-empowerment” (Podair 212).

Lewis sees the meaning of the community-control struggle very differently. In the second chapter, she summarizes the history of the dozen-year mobilization of community and radical activists, many of them white and Jewish, to integrate New York's schools in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision and the dramatic shift of those reformers after 1966 away from integration and toward the fight for community control. In chapter 3, "Self-Determining Citizens," Lewis focuses on the actions of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville community board prior to the fall 1968 strike and on the particular role women played in the organizing and governing efforts, which makes the important point that the OH-B demonstration district, along with the two other demonstration projects in Harlem and the Lower East Side in Manhattan, "served as an alternative institution within the larger school system" (33–34), an innovation originally sanctioned by the New York City Board of Education (BOE) bureaucracy in response to growing parental and community dissatisfaction with overly centralized policy decision making.

Ironically, chapter 3 ends on the eve of the fall 1968 strike, while chapter 4 begins with the passage of New York State's decentralization law in 1969 that carved up the New York City school system into 31 districts. Lewis devotes five pages in chapter 3 to a fall 1967 UFT job action but almost nothing to the much larger and more consequential fall 1968 events beyond a terse two-sentence summary (53). The 1968 UFT strike is nowhere to be found in this book (other than as a specter). Lewis never makes clear why she did not write about the strike. Perhaps she assumed that a blow-by-blow recounting that focused on the outsized personalities that dominated the strike (particularly Shanker's and John Lindsay's) would be familiar enough and thus did not warrant consideration in a book focused specifically on the school reform movement. Yet such an elision obscures the unexpected ways in which neighborhood public schools actually functioned under community control, since community-control reforms and the UFT strike that followed created a "hothouse" environment that allowed curricular reform and experimentation in governance to flourish in specific schools. Labor historians are obviously predisposed to feature strikes in our analyses of working-class behavior, but Lewis's decision to pass up an opportunity to say something about the epochal 1968 UFT strike in a book about community control seems odd to this reviewer.

The second half of the book turns to previously unreported historical developments: the creation of new school districts under the 1969 decentralization law in which locally elected school boards hired district superintendents (just as the OH-B board had done in 1967) and the exercise by those superintendents of a good deal of authority and autonomy in implementing community-supported educational reforms. In chapter 4, Lewis notes that Shanker played decentralization for his own and the union's ends, supporting (often successfully) UFT-friendly slates that ran in district school board elections. He also notably opposed, at every opportunity, curricular and administrative innovations that various district superintendents tried to implement to improve the woeful educational achievements of public school students of color in the two decades after 1968. Lewis repeatedly notes that Shanker's favorite tactic in these years was vicious attacks on any and all critics and opponents of the UFT, depicting them as radical militants and racist black nationalists whose only interest was to subvert the public school system and the UFT.

Such union resistance did not always succeed, however, as two of Lewis's subsequent chapters—focusing on District 13 in central Brooklyn, led by Jerome Harris, an African American, and District 4 in the Bronx, headed by Anthony Alvarado, a Puerto Rican—

amply demonstrate. Both district superintendents were hired by parent-controlled local boards and, according to Lewis, were able to initiate innovative curricular and administrative reforms that actively involved parents, encouraged innovative teaching methods, and dramatically improved student achievement. Alvarado was especially successful in launching pathbreaking bilingual and alternative small schools in his district with strong parental input and support. Alvarado also managed to innovate a system of “teacher leaders” in a number of the experimental schools, circumventing the UFT contract and the rigid control over administrator appointments by the central bureaucracy. Lewis argues that these teacher leaders, who replaced principals, were actually provided a real career ladder that did not otherwise exist for teachers under the terms of the UFT contract (114–15).

The final chapters in the book offer tantalizing tidbits about parent-led community-control efforts as late as 1996, which Lewis argues carried forward three decades later the ideals pioneered in OH-B of active parental involvement in school reform (138–39). The book ends with Michael Bloomberg winning mayoral control of the schools in 2002 and his subsequent ceding of the school system to Chancellor Joel Klein. Klein recentralized administrative and curricular functions and obliterated all vestiges of community input in school reform, at the same time offering support for charter schools, a pet Bloomberg/Klein project. And one final insult to note: Lewis reveals (9) that Klein’s minions consigned the historical records of the three-decade-long district school board experiments to city dumpsters.

Heather Lewis’s study is not where you would want to start if you were initially trying to find out what happened in the public school struggles that produced the epochal 1968 UFT strike and the contested history that followed. But it is certainly the book you would want to turn to soon after, given the author’s careful and well-argued elaboration of the critical issues of parental involvement and community empowerment that remain at the core of the struggle over US public schooling today.

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### **Palomino:**

#### **Clinton Jencks and Mexican-American Unionism in the American Southwest**

James J. Lorence

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013

xxii + 266 pp., \$55.00 (cloth)

Elisa Sanchez stood up and spoke during the January 8, 2006, memorial service for Clinton Jencks in San Diego, California, as recounted in James Lorence’s *Palomino*. Sanchez, a child in Grant County, New Mexico, during the Empire Zinc strike made famous by the movie *Salt of the Earth* (dir. Herbert J. Biberman, 1954), remembered Jencks as a leader who nurtured local leadership while being invisible. “While I can remember being conscious of “El Palomino,” he was never the focus, our own leadership was” (197). She called him “the flint” and the local Mexican American community “the kindling” for what some Mexican Americans in the area remember as “a true American revolution in Grant County” (ibid.).