

***Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism***  
**by Jerald Podair**

Daniel H. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004, pp. xii + 218, notes, index, \$29.95 paper.

Almost four decades after the event, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools crisis continues to cast its shadow over New York City race relations. On May 9, 1968, a local board established as part of an experiment in community control of schools in the predominantly African-American Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, sent termination letters to nineteen white, mostly Jewish educators. All were members of the union representing New York's public school teachers, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The UFT attempted to obtain their reinstatement through three citywide teachers' strikes in the fall of 1968. Rife with charges of racism, union busting, and anti-Semitism, they spilled out from the educational system into the bloodstream of the city itself, creating a poisonous atmosphere that continues to divide black and white New Yorkers today.

The tragedy of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville dispute was compounded by the fact that it occurred in the nation's quintessential liberal city. New York was unmatched in its level of government social welfare expenditures. It was a strong labor city, a pioneer in public sector unionism. It was a culturally pluralist city, whose mayor at the time of the crisis, John Lindsay, was among the most racially progressive in the nation. But as Daniel H. Perlstein demonstrates in *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism*, Ocean Hill-Brownsville was the scene of New York's liberal crackup.

The city's defining ideology collapsed under the strain of conflicting views of race's role in the city's sociopolitics. White supporters of the ousted UFT teachers argued for a class-centered liberalism that excluded considerations of race. African-Americans and their white leftist allies embraced an ideology consciously built around constructions of racial identity. Both versions, as Perlstein shows, were inherently flawed. The race-blindness, to which UFT strikers professed to aspire in the New York of the late 1960s, was a disingenuous fantasy. But their opponents in the black community and on the left justified the teacher firings in ways that came dangerously close to racial essentialism, another ideological dead end.

Ultimately, what Perlstein describes as liberalism's eclipse in New York resulted from its inability to address the needs of two groups with conflicting agendas. Many of the striking UFT teachers had used the Board of Examiners system governing hiring and advancement in the city schools, with its array of tests and ranked job eligibility lists, as a socioeconomic escalator. As they moved up the ranks, the teachers acquired a "professional" status that distanced them from the children, parents, and communities they purported to serve. The African-Americans who confronted them at Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the city at large, however, had been largely cut off from this process. As the city's economic nexus shifted from industry to services in the years following World War II, they were poorly positioned to take advantage of opportunities in fields that demanded education and technical skill. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment gave these disempowered New Yorkers the chance to assert a measure of control over the institutions that had heretofore marginalized them.

The nineteen disputed UFT teachers thus became stand-ins for clashing ideologies and the clashing interests that underlay them. The terminations pushed two critical questions lurking beneath the surface of modern American liberalism to the forefront: What were the responsibilities of white liberals when their interests and those of African-Americans conflicted? And was liberalism's basic unit of measurement the individual or the group? None of Perlstein's subjects--Jewish UFT strikers, white community control advocates, New Leftists, black educational activists and cultural nationalists, even the African-American socialist Bayard Rustin--could formulate satisfactory responses to these questions in the context of the Ocean Hill-

Brownsville controversy. Unable to offer a workable balance between self-interest and altruism, group and individual identity, liberalism lost its power to influence these actors as they sought their own versions of justice in the school system and elsewhere.

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis ended in November 1968 with the forced return of the terminated UFT teachers; the district's community control experiment was discontinued soon afterward. The dispute's racial bile, however, continued to drain into the city's culture. New York's politics shifted rightward in the succeeding decades, as traumatized whites fleeing liberalism helped elect a series of neo-conservative mayors in hopes of preserving what remained of their prerogatives. Meanwhile, despite successive decentralizations and recentralizations of the New York City public schools, and an influx of African-American faculty, student achievement continued to lag, and the teacher-neighborhood synergy envisioned by community control supporters in 1968 failed to materialize. Whether this is evidence of ongoing structural inequity and institutional racism, as Perlstein argues, or simply the result of irreconcilable understandings of the meaning of liberalism in modern American life, it is clear that 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.

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