Only in New Orleans
School Choice and Equity Post-Hurricane Katrina

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With 2015 marking the 10th commemoration of Hurricane Katrina, education reform in New Orleans continues to garner substantial local, national, and international attention. Advocates and critics alike have continued to cite test scores, new school providers, and different theories of governance in making multiple arguments for and against how contemporary education policy is shaping public education and its role in the rebuilding of the city.

Rather than trying to provide a single, unified account of education reform in New Orleans, the chapters in this volume provide multiple ways of approaching some of the most significant questions around school choice and educational equity that have arisen in the years since Katrina.

This collection of research articles, essays, and journalistic accounts of education reform in New Orleans collectively argues that the extreme makeover of the city’s public schools toward a new market-based model was shaped by many local, historically specific conditions. In consequence, while the city’s schools have been both heralded as a model for other cities and derided as a lesson in the limits of market-based reform, the experience of education reform that has taken place in the city – and its impacts on the lives of students, families, and educators – could have happened only in New Orleans.
Only in New Orleans
EDUCATIONAL FUTURES
RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE
Volume 65

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Edited by

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This book is dedicated to the survivors of Katrina who remain in the city, the diaspora victims who were forced to move away or could not return, and to those who are no longer with us.

Especially, to Harold Baquet – a Katrina survivor and patriot of the city. Harold graciously provided the cover photograph and we are honored to include his artistic vision in our work.
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Hurricane Katrina was a deadly Category 5 tropical hurricane that hit New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico in late August in 2005 with winds of 175 mph causing 1,833 recorded fatalities (700 in New Orleans alone), 135 missing people, and over $108 billion worth of property damage. It originated over the Bahamas on August 23 and made landfall first in Florida before deepening in the Gulf making its second landfall in southeast Louisiana on August 29. It was the fifth most deadly storm ever record in the United States and the most costly. It caused the greatest number of deaths and the most damage in New Orleans where hurricane surge protection measures and the levee system failed with devastating consequences, flooding eighty per cent of the city and all of the Mississippi beach front towns. There were huge economic and environmental impacts, with the hurricane destroying forest and oil industries as well as basic transportation and public infrastructure, including public schools. This devastation caused one of the largest diasporas in the history of the United States with some 100,00 people leaving New Orleans and Louisiana for other states, leaving the city of New Orleans with less than half its original population.

There was much criticism of leadership and mismanagement of relief funds in the aftermath of the disaster, particularly in response to the seemingly endless days that it took to assist the survivors, especially African-Americans, and with the lack of effective measures to deal with the flooding of the city. The disaster raised a huge and ongoing debate in public policy about the intersection of emergency management, environment policy, and poverty. Critics pointed to leadership and management problems that were compounded at all levels of government.

This book edited by Luis Mirón, Brian R. Beabout, and Joseph L. Boselovic details the hurricane’s effects and impacts on education and provides a critical framework for understanding education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans. They show that market-based and school choice policies and test-based accountability of No Child Left Behind became the dominant policy response, sanctioned and advocated at the highest levels. This collection provides a critical account of public education before Katrina in order to assess what happened in the following decade and in particular the contexts of disaster, the lived experiences of educational reform and its dynamics, and the ideology and rhetoric of educational change. One would have thought that rebuilding public education would be crucial to the recovery strategy. This collection tells a very different story. In a fascinating and compelling account, the individual essays in this collection plot the dimensions of wholesale privatization, and the
imposition of a charter school agenda with all its ideological baggage. From ignoring the
needs of public education in the immediate aftermath to providing business opportunities serving private sector interests, the officials have shown disinterest and partiality. The educational emergency after Katrina has been followed by an extreme makeover in educational reform based on narrow sector interests. The public education and health consequences of disasters affecting large populations require an effective process that can analyze current trends especially of recurrent and cycle disasters, help develop preparations for the mitigation of future extreme events, to coordinate and harness all local and national organizations in the disaster management process, and understand the critical role of community participation. The integration of emergency management based on a comprehensive approach to enable visibility, cooperation, and interoperability across all emergency organizations, according to best practices often requires and makes considerable use of public infrastructure in terms of organization and buildings. Public schools offer community hubs for interagency coordination, for emergency protection and accommodation, for local community participation.

What Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism” in her book *The Shock Doctrine* occurred following one of the worst natural disasters in US history. Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, following the annihilation of New Orleans’ public infrastructure, charter school reformers pushed for a market-based policy preference against social democratic values of community agency and participation. In her Introduction, Klein writes:

> In sharp contrast to the glacial pace with which the levees were repaired and the electricity grid brought back online, the auctioning-off of New Orleans’ school system took place with military speed and precision. Within 19 months, with most of the city’s poor residents still in exile, New Orleans’ public school system had been almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools.

This collection is a book full of careful analysis and evaluation. It sifts the evidence and provides the necessary detail to assess the claim for charter schools and the accountability movement. If ever there was a textbook example of a case to answer in order to test these claims, New Orleans schooling after the decade of charter reform is this case – the best possible case – and this book provides an evidential evaluation of the market “experiment.” It is compelling reading for all teachers, students, and policymakers and important to both remember and analyse – not only a memorial to those who lost their lives, their livelihood, and their schools. This volume is also a cautionary tale about the need for preparation and emergency management in the face of an unpredictable future for the stakeholders of public education, which is increasingly a target for radical ideologues who all too often rail against anything public in favor of the further privatization of education.

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We would also like to make the following personal acknowledgements:

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In the ten years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast, the city of New Orleans has undergone significant changes in the realm of public education that have garnered national and international attention. While the push to develop market-based and school choice policies was present in the city before the storm (Mirón, 2008), the push to re-make the city’s schools after 2005 also brought new actors to the stage. A plethora of non-profit and charter management organizations joined the locally-elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the state-level Recovery School District (RSD) in shaping public education in the city following Katrina (Beabout, 2007). This all took place in the midst of a city that was experiencing broader structural, demographic, and economic changes following the storm and in the years of rebuilding and recovery.

Looking back over the last decade – with 91% of students in charter schools and the RSD becoming the first all-charter district in the nation (Cowen Institute, 2014) – significant and critical questions remain. Charter schools, school choice, and test-based accountability that followed the federal No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) initiatives have increasingly influenced policy and discourse on education reform across the country. No other city, however, has placed so much faith and effort in market-based education reform as New Orleans. While United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan garnered criticism for referring to the hurricane as “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans” (Anderson, 2010), much of the conversation around schooling in the city following the storm was concerned with whether or not something extraordinary might come from such a swift and large-scale change in how public education is done in New Orleans.

The questions that persist – and haunt such optimistic perspectives –are those of the relationship between school choice and equity. In a city that has been able, with the support of state- and federal-level policy making and funding, to create an almost entirely school choice system, does this paradigm shift indeed address in an adequate manner the persistent inequality that defined New Orleans schools for so
many decades? It is around this and related questions that many educators, policy makers, and scholars across the country have turned their attention to post-Katrina New Orleans education reform as a potential model for change.

But while the transition from a traditional public school system that suffered from decades of disinvestment and urban decay to a decentralized system characterized by charter schools does indeed contain significant lessons for local, state, and national education reform initiatives, it would be a great mistake to treat education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans as an experiment that can be easily replicated anywhere else. Such a perspective eradicates the cultural, historical, and economic realities that have made New Orleans the city that it is today (Sampson, 2012). The only way to truly assess the experience of public education in New Orleans after Katrina is to understand the realities of how public education developed in the city before the storm and how current developments and events fit in with the broader narratives of the city’s history (Boselovic, this volume). In short, while the reforms that the city has undertaken since Katrina are connected to efforts in other cities both before and since 2005, what has happened here could happen only in New Orleans.

From this framework and with a perspective developed over ten years following Katrina, it is our hope that this book can serve to bring greater nuance and complexity to discussions of New Orleans and education reform going forward. The immediate aftermath of Katrina brought substantial attention from scholars from a variety of disciplines interested in what the storm meant and would mean for the city and for its schools (Brunsma, Overfelt, & Picou, 2007; Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010; Giroux, 2006; Hartman & Squires, 2006; Johnson, 2011; Marable & Clarke, 2008; Robinson & Brown, 2007). It is upon this rich legacy that we seek to make our own contribution.

We do so with the help of the scholars, journalists, and education professionals whose knowledge and experiences fill these pages. Rather than trying to provide a single, unified account of education reform in New Orleans, the goal of this book is to contribute to the scholarship on contemporary New Orleans on multiple fronts as well as to the broader conversations around the issues of educational policy and governance that have come to shape national discourse in recent years. Just as Beabout (this volume) argues for the necessity of “[d]efining change in human terms,” we hope that these chapters – in their heterogeneity of focus, perspective, and methodology – provide a useful framework that, similar to the work of Dixson (2011), highlights not only the traditional perspective of researchers, but also – and on an equal level –the perspective and experiences of students, families, teachers, and community members.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

The book is divided into four sections: *The Social and Historical Contexts of Disaster and Recovery*; *Educational Policy as Lived Experience*; *School Leadership and the Organizational Dynamics of School Reform*; and *The Ideology and Rhetoric*.
of Educational Change. While individual sections provide particular areas of focus and units of analysis that may be of use to particular readers and scholars more so than others, we believe that the unity of these contributions provides a perspective of substantial breadth and depth on education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans that would be useful to scholars, practitioners, and policy makers in a variety of areas of intellectual interest and professional work.

The first section of the book sets the tone by providing multiple historical perspectives that serve to situate the realities of post-Katrina education reform within a broader context. The opening chapter from Luis Mirón and Mickey Lauria provides a scholarly reflection from two researchers with decades of lived experience and research on schools in New Orleans. Their work builds on this introduction to provide knowledge on the changes that took place in the city's schools after 2005. Joseph L. Boselovic follows this with a look at the historical development of public education in New Orleans over two centuries through the lens of critical theory and the intellectual tradition of Jürgen Habermas. Carol Ann MacGregor and Brian Fitzpatrick then provide a look at the unique history and tradition of Catholic schooling in New Orleans and developments in private education following Katrina. The concluding chapter in this section from Cameron McCarthy and Brenda Sanya highlights how the ideological of neoliberalism and the dynamics of globalism are shaping Chicago as a 21st-century city and, in kind, re-configuring the educational experiences of students and families. This deliberate departure from Louisiana serves to note that while the experiences of post-Katrina education reform are unique to New Orleans, the developments in educational and social policy making in the city since 2005 are embedded in a national and indeed international context that must be considered.

The second section begins with an excerpt from Sarah Carr's remarkable journalistic account of education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans, Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and America's Struggle to Educate its Children (Bloomsbury, 2013). This is followed by research on democratic contestation around education reform by Alice Huff. Based on interviews and participatory observations, her analysis demonstrates how the development of market-based values in public education, selective school closures, and the restructuring of school governance have affected the ability of community members to articulate and address their education-related concerns in the public sphere. Max S. Ciolino, James D. Kirylo, Luis F. Mirón, and Kelly Frazier provide the next chapter, which builds on interviews and focus groups that were done with teachers in RSD schools. This research provides an overview of some of the areas of optimism and concern that teachers articulated following the storm, from new possibilities in the classroom to leadership and governance problems at the school and systems level. These perspectives lead into a discussion on “no-excuses” pedagogy and teaching in New Orleans charter schools from Beth Sondel. Her school observations and interviews as well as her critical analysis of neoliberal education reform raises significant questions about the standards of measurement and goals of neoliberal education reform. Paul Green
concludes this section with a look at educational change initiatives in Louisiana before the storm in comparison to changes that have come since and what this means for educational access and opportunity for the disadvantaged youth and families of New Orleans in the present moment.

The third section shifts from more classroom-level concerns to matters of educational leadership. Brian R. Beabout departs from existing theories of change to better understand the actual thought processes of how school leaders have enacted change in particular schools in a decentralized school system. The subsequent chapter by Scott Bauer and Ira Bogotch addresses related concerns. While comparing the post-Katrina reforms to the centralized system of schooling that existed before the storm, the authors question the extent to which innovation in school structures, programs, and practices are actually taking place and the status of training and sustaining school leadership in a fractured system of schooling going forward. This is followed by a look at the evaluative uses of site visitation across New Orleans and in Louisiana more generally by Mary Shannon Chiasson. Based on interviews with school leaders, she discusses the limits of test-based accountability and different possibilities for improving school quality at the level of school leadership.

The final section of the book begins with a critical look at what Edward P. St. John refers to as “crisis capitalism.” Reflecting on the relationship between a so-called natural disaster and market-based policy making, he highlights the ways in which the inequalities of social class and race long-present in New Orleans’ schools have not and cannot be ameliorated by market-based reforms. Steven Nelson follows with a look at an important but often overlooked area of concern in market-based school policy making: charter school boards. Comparing the composition of charter school boards in New Orleans to the student demographics and the community constituency which charter schools serve, he develops a provocative line of thought around the implications of charter school leadership for the struggle for civil rights. In the next chapter, Lauren Bierbaum explores how concepts such as democratic control and data-driven have served a variety of ideological frameworks around educational reform in the city. She argues, however, that the lack of a shared language has served to take away from, rather than support, a healthy and productive discourse about educational policy making. The chapter from John Fischetti and James D. Kirylo looks back at the educational writings of Thomas Jefferson and the foundational ideas of American public schooling to critique the state of public education in Louisiana in the present day. The book then concludes with the work of Huriya Jabbar, Priya Goel La Londe, Elizabeth DeBray, Janelle Scott, and Christopher Lubinski that provides a novel perspective on how education officials and school leaders define evidence in New Orleans. Their research and analysis also looks at the ways in which contemporary educational and policy research does and does not shape existing policies related to schooling. From this systems-level perspective, we end the book by looking beyond New Orleans.
THE IMPERATIVE OF MEMORY

On and around August 29th, 2015, news reports and social media will, no doubt, be flooded once again with images of Hurricane Katrina from those perilous days and weeks ten years ago. What has perhaps endured most thoroughly in the collective memory of Hurricane Katrina across the nation has been the pictures and videos of abandoned Black families, trapped on rooftops, water rising.

In one of the most iconic of these images, however, photographer Richard Misrach (2010) captures the immediate aftermath of the storm, once floodwaters began to recede and while the residents of the city were still largely scattered. With the whereabouts of its residents unknown, all that is seen in Misrach’s picture is a brick house with graffiti on the side that reads: “Destroy this memory.”

From the privileged position and relative tranquility of reflection ten years later, it is important to be able to look back critically and clearly – on the experiences of Katrina and its aftermath, on the swift and radical changes in educational policy – while also looking toward the city’s future. It is the task of scholars, educators, and citizens alike to not forget the memory of Katrina as time continues to pass. Instead, we must build upon the experiences of the city from the past ten years as well as the history that preceded the storm to continue to work for a more just and equitable city and a stronger system of public education.

REFERENCES


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SECTION 1

THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS
OF DISASTER AND RECOVERY
LUIS MIRÓN AND MICKEY LAURIA

1. UP TO HIGHER GROUND

School Choice and the Promises of Democracy Post-2005

THE LANDSCAPE

When we began our work on the New Orleans public schools nearly twenty years ago (Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Lauria & Mirón, 2005), it never occurred to us – nor was it a discourse in the public imagination – that we would witness such radical transformation of public education in the city. It was literally unthinkable. Moreover as one of us had argued earlier (Mirón, 1992/2010), the near repugnant attitude of dominant political and social elites toward the public sector (city and state government) preempted the implementation of reform-minded public policies, especially when it came to the reallocation of funding that diminished the power of elected leaders such as members of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). All this changed with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina.

It took a perfect storm to undue a populist culture harking back to the Huey Long era.

Post-2005, the educational and urban landscapes in New Orleans were transformed, virtually overnight, in the immediate aftermath of the vicious storm’s arrival. We call it an extreme makeover. Why? At over 90% “market share,” charter schools now overwhelmingly dominate the organizational structure of public schools in New Orleans (Cowen Institute, 2014). No city comes close to such a high percentage. Furthermore, the state takeover of over 100 public schools in 2005, coupled with the rapid-fire (Mirón & Ward, 2007) evolution of traditional neighborhood schools (and some magnet schools), forayed our public schools into unchartered waters: multiple systems of public schools and a tiered hierarchy of student outcomes in varying types of charter public schools and multiple school districts (Levin, Daschbach, & Perry, 2010). A large numbers of schools, previously governed by OPSB, have been left in a kind of holding pattern. The Recovery School District (RSD) has maintained administrative oversight of these schools under the auspice of the State of Louisiana. Lastly, and perhaps the most controversial reason we brand this iteration of school reform an extreme example is the apparent marginalization of the role of democratic deliberation within the public sphere around issues of educational governance and policy. With the greatly reduced role of an elected school board in the governance of local schools, there is little space to express community voices in policy discussions. This demise is marked perhaps most clearly by the unilateral dismissal of over 7,000
public school employees who were protected by a collective bargaining agreement through the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) union (see below). This illegal action and the concomitant establishment of quasi-private schools and independent boards governing the semi-private charter schools leaves little space to configure an ethos of historically-imagined public (common) schools in the tradition of Horace Mann (for a different perspective, see Bierbaum, this volume).

We do not wish to be misunderstood, however. This radical embodiment of neoliberalism in the urban institutional landscape in New Orleans is not necessarily “bad.” Indeed the consequences of this evolution of public education in New Orleans may be both good and bad. However, one of the major goals of this book is for researchers, scholars, and public policy analysts to assess, on balance, whether school children have largely benefited from the intensive reforms or have experienced harm, reform having left them behind. As is the case with most social analysis, benefits are to be found alongside harm. The answer to this complex question depends on which classes of students we are discussing and perhaps more importantly, in which neighborhoods these students reside. But we do not want to get ahead of ourselves. We want to first summarize and characterize specific reforms in the arenas of public policy and school governance before moving forward with our analysis.

In this overview chapter on school reform in New Orleans post-2005, we want to do a few simple things: 1. Provide a brief summary of the overall thrust and possible impacts of the sweeping changes; 2. Compare the character of the reforms in New Orleans with the “turnaround” strategies of the Obama Administration, which have its origins in No Child Left Behind; and 3. Provide an overall assessment of the reforms while suggesting in broad strokes positive alternatives for the future. We begin with the nature of the reforms undertaken in New Orleans post-2005.

First, at over 90% market share, charter schools in the city embody what the leaders and promoters of school reform locally boast as “universal choice.” In this particular context, universal choice means that, in theory, any student in the city is free to attend the public school of her choice. Put simply, place of residence need not determine the educational and economic future of the children of New Orleans. Practitioners of school choice have largely realized this ideal. That is to say, by and large, parents and their children enjoy the relative freedom to attend schools of their choice, unencumbered by where they live. With few exceptions – and these are significant constraints – students and families are free to choose among a plethora of school organizational configurations and curricula offerings, ranging from the “no excuses” model of the KIPP schools to the performing arts and professional apprenticeships (culinary arts) to military academies (for an argument on the pervasive nature of the “no excuses” model, see Sondel, this volume). While families can choose to enroll in most schools through a central enrollment system, there are a few exceptions. The few notable exceptions are the selective admissions of the academically high performing charter schools – with the most notable, perhaps, being Lusher Charter, which has long held public and professional acclaim for its
educational achievements. In the span of a few years, Lusher Charter has achieved renown, attracting wealthy and well-known supporters, including New Orleans Saints’ star quarterback, Drew Brees, and former president of Tulane University, Scott Cowen.

Second, with the deep-layered transformation of the educational landscape (school offerings), the city has also witnessed a marked change in the teaching force and the makeup of school leaders. Gone are the prerequisites of “first hired, last fired” of collective bargaining. In its place, for better or worse (see Ciolino, Kirylo, Mirón, & Frazier, this volume) are graduates of Teach for America (TFA) and the demographic groups TFA represents – largely private school educated young teachers from some of the academically elite and financially well-endowed universities such as Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard (Sondel, 2013). At the school level, charter schools do not require formal university training for school leaders (for example, state certification) (see Bogotch & Bauer, this volume). In place of the conventional principal profile are young, largely professionally untrained, school leaders who, to their credit, are willing to risk job security in exchange for higher salaries and greater autonomy in leadership. It is the latter issue – professional autonomy – that we wish to describe in some detail in this overview of the character of school reform in New Orleans post-2005.

Prior to 2005, OPSB behaved in ways that were consistent with most school districts located in urban centers: local politics largely shaped, if not outright ultimately determined, educational policy. The school district operated in a similar manner to what political scientist Paul Peterson described in his classic study of urban schools, *School Politics Chicago Style* (1976). At the district level, staff and high-level administrative positions were obtained, in large part, as a result of one’s connections to a particular school board member. If one enjoyed close political relationships with the president of OPSB, for example, it was more likely that such professional possibilities could become a reality. These political connections did not guarantee a position (or, similarly, contracts for the provision of district services). However, it was quite difficult to achieve advancement in the absence of board support or a personal relationship with the Superintendent of Schools.

At the school level, these political relationships were equally pernicious. Both the board and the central office staff would frequently micro-manage school level operations. One such example of this behavior was evident in the hiring of principals or their transferring to other schools. The micro-management grew so bad that schools, because of wont for resources, had to literally supply their own toilet paper and classroom supplies such as supplementary teaching materials. Naturally, these intolerable working conditions ultimately made it to front-page stories in New Orleans’ *Times-Picayune* newspaper, culminating in corruption charges that included the conviction of school board members convicted of federal crimes for corruption and misuse of public funds (see Mirón, 2008).

Today, most school-level administrators enjoy a great deal of professional autonomy, for example in the selection of teachers and setting of pay scales. The
freedom to set and allocate their own budgets means that mission-driven charter schools (such as the KIPP charter management organization) enjoy the autonomy to direct teaching and learning – the curriculum – to be tailored to the needs of their individual students. This is a marked change from 2005.

In summary, the educational landscape is substantially different, if not entirely transformed, post-2005. It is helpful to contrast the changes in New Orleans brought upon by the arrival of a perfect storm with the strategies of the federal government during the previous five years.

ALIGNMENT WITH NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Nationally, school reform is a cause with widespread support political support from Republicans and Democrats alike. Since taking office in 2009, the Obama Administration has championed effective leadership and managerial efficiency to turnaround underperforming public schools. Advocacy groups such as Students First and Stand for Children also favor turnaround models advancing such school-based reforms. The Department of Education has awarded School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to support variants of this turnaround approach, all of which embrace principles of school autonomy and competition, similar to the practices in New Orleans described above. The school “turnaround” models attempt to quickly improve individual schools by installing entirely new leaders and teachers in schools deemed to be underperforming (Lubienski & Mirón, 2013).

All versions of the new managerial approach stress the effects of schools themselves on students and treat school leadership as the key lever in making positive change. It is to the credit of the architects of universal choice and school autonomy in New Orleans post-2005 that these practices were incrementally implemented as New Orleans evolved to a near all charter school environment. We argue, however, that these evolutionary changes merely mirrored global neoliberal trends, and that policy and business elites in Louisiana simply seized the entrepreneurial moment – due to the devalorization of the school system and its political apparatus – to act upon these trends ahead of the curve. Space does not allow us in this brief introductory essay to explore the full ramifications of the interactive relationships between globalization (neoliberalism) and local social policy and discourse practices, though others have explored this topic to a certain extent (for examples, see Boselovic, forthcoming; Buras, 2011; Sondel, 2013, this volume).

A simple turnaround model introduces a new principal and many new teachers into a school where students are struggling. Yet even though replacing the staff at a failing school makes intuitive sense, underlying causes of failure may not be addressed through such an approach – and negative consequences can flow from upending a schools’ arrangements in already unstable poor communities.

The restart model transfers school management to charter school operators. While federal policy specifies a rigorous selection process in hiring an effective school leader, overall evidence on the performance of charter schools shows that they do
no better than public schools with comparable students (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes [CREDO], 2013). For the most part, the New Orleans model relies on non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs) that are “mission driven.” Among others, these include national CMOs such as KIPP as well as CMOs that are exclusive to the city, such as Crescent City Schools. Although some of these CMOs have had difficulty managing transportation and other operational issues (some with devastating consequences, as will be discussed in greater depth below), for the most part, the results seem no worse than under the pre-2005 traditional model (see Carr, 2013, this issue).

Another model identifies poor performing schools as targets for abrupt school closure, with the presumption that the affected students will then attend higher quality schools. While this has not been the norm in New Orleans, it has been an increasingly common policy strategy in cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia.

A transformational model, to some degree a catchall, is the only approach that stresses instructional improvements. Still, it also calls for replacing the school leadership. Likewise, there are few examples of genuinely transformational schools in New Orleans, owing in part to the difficulty of securing the financial resources and human capital to engage in substantial transformation.

New Orleans, thus, has embraced – and seemingly led the path for – the restart of scores of public schools. There are at least three reasons why this strategy is popular with school choice advocates. First, restart is ideologically appealing. It dovetails nicely with the anti-government ethos of the city and its consolidating of pro-growth, entrepreneurial ethos post-2005. Secondly, and in line with this ideological compatibility, is that such a model is anti-union in character. Indeed, collective bargaining rights were, in effect, abolished with the disestablishing of the collective bargaining unit, UTNO and the unilateral dismissal of 7,500 public school employees (the majority of who were veteran classroom teachers). Thirdly, political control over public education (as well as other sectors) – long sought after by the city’s social elite – is consolidated with autonomous charter boards, which resemble, we would argue, micro district-level boards (Nelson, this volume). They are governance entities unto themselves (for a contrasting perspective, see Bierbaum this volume).

In the next section we briefly illustrate the highlights of these strategies as they are translated in New Orleans.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Post-Katrina, it appears that elementary and high school students have performed relatively well on most measures of student achievement in comparison to their national counterparts, New Orleans (Cowen Institute, 2014). Without analyzing the extent of improved student achievement as measured by locally and administered test scores – and more importantly, not attributing causality to the implementation of school reform – we can attest that student learning has improved. For example,
by the latest measure of state performance, the percentage of students attending a “D” or “F” school was approximately 80% in 2005. The percentage in 2013 dropped to approximately 30%. Furthermore, according to the latest CREDO study (2013), students in New Orleans and other urban centers (Baton Rouge) significantly outperformed their traditional public school (TPS) counterparts on measures of student achievement in reading and math. Specifically, 41% of students in charter schools made significant improvements in reading and 46% of students made significant improvements in math in the 2010-2011 school year, the year of the latest analysis.

Less positive and not evident in such quantitative studies are the number of high schools and the quality of high school instruction available to communities left behind by Hurricane Katrina. In particular, majority black neighborhoods in the mostly poor and overwhelmingly black Lower Ninth Ward and the middle class black neighborhood of Pontchartrain Park have no high schools as of the publication of this volume.

As might be expected over the course of the previous ten years, a few crises have arisen. Some of these have been horrific. Although not directly attributable to the proliferation of charter schools in the city, one recent incident in particular is in need of commentary. A six-year-old child was killed while waiting for his bus to take him to school, a distance of less than two miles away. The boy’s mother escorted her son and sister to the bus stop but apparently failed to cross several major busy streets. A speeding run away driver killed the boy and injured his sister (Daley, 2014).

This is not the first incident involving the use of buses to transport students to charter schools away from their residential neighborhoods. A less ugly and tragic example was a child sleeping most of the day on a bus, failing to arrive home. In short, bus commuting to charter schools has put some New Orleans children at risk. However the accidental death described above is the most serious incident to date. Anecdotally, it highlights the ultimate cost to some families as a result of implementing universal school choice in the city.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

As our ethnographic, extended case studies documented pre-2005 (Lauria & Mirón, 2005; Mirón, 1996; Mirón & Lauria, 1998), OPSB governed and operated a number of excellent magnet schools, including a nationally ranked high school, Benjamin Franklin. In fact, our children attended some of these public schools. They went on to gain admission to internationally ranked research universities, including the University of California-Berkeley, the California Institute of Technology, and Barnard College. So the widespread perception that the public schools in New Orleans were universally poor was inaccurate, at least in some of the academically successful magnet (city-wide) schools and a few quality neighborhood schools. As is the case post-2005, some of these excellent magnet public schools (and a scattering of neighborhood schools) were selective admissions schools, admitting students as
a result of placement tests or other criteria (for example artistic aptitude for students applying to a professional conservatory, the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts).

A more accurate characterization was that the governance of the school district via its elected school board was often incompetent, usually dysfunctional, and, at times, corrupt. As one of the authors and others have chronicled (Mirón, 2008), OPSB and its enabling central office embezzled millions of dollars of federal funds just prior to Hurricane Katrina. Several OPSB members resigned their seats, and the FBI arrested a few others – some of whom would ultimately serve considerable time in federal prison. At the same time, these events were not confined to New Orleans. Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia all experienced similar phenomena during this time. The perfect storm that was Katrina ignited the bonfire that lay historically dormant beneath the surface within the repugnant disregard for government and the ethos of privatization in elite-driven New Orleans (Mirón, 1992/2010; Smith & Keller, 1983). On balance, we believe that the reform of the district’s governing system was overdue, and the concomitant temporary dismantling of the central office resulting from the state’s takeover of 107 public schools by the Recovery School District in New Orleans was in large part justified.

The significant difference post-2005 is that, true to the title of this volume, apparently only in New Orleans are virtually all of its public schools operated as independently managed, quasi-private charter schools. Some scholars, most notably Antonia Darder (2014) and Diane Ravitch (2011) refuse to designate charter schools as “public,” wherein the idea of the public following the usage of commonwealth refers to the interests of the public sphere (for an expanded discussion on this matter as it relates to public education in New Orleans, see Boselovic, this volume). For these progressive scholars as well as other, more empirically oriented researchers such as Christopher Lubienski (Jabbar et al., this volume; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010), charter schools serve largely the private interest. That is to say, the interests of the (unelected) governing boards of the individual charter schools and their private or non-profit providers. Although some advocates of charter schooling argue that such a decentralized model of schooling allows for more parental engagement and input, the evidence in New Orleans points to the contrary (Boselovic, this volume; Buras, 2011; Huff, this volume; Nelson, this volume). Whether the universal move toward charter schools under the ideological banner of school choice represents the demise of the public sphere or a more politically palpable move to empower parents and students – or both – is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we feel that it is important to take an approach that is both pragmatic and idealistic to suggest strategies to achieve what we consider badly needed policy adjustments in the current system of universal choice – as well as suggest what we believe can be innovative and imaginative new directions.

In a presentation given at the University of New Orleans, Henry M. Levin (2008) theorized three analytically distinct, yet critically pragmatic, components of charter schools and their hegemonic ideological appeal to the citizenry and education.
consumer. The three elements are: 1. School Choice; 2. School Autonomy; and 3. Public Accountability. These theoretical components are not mere abstractions, however.

The concept of school choice is widely understood, especially in the New Orleans context wherein state leaders such as Leslie Jacobs have touted “universal choice” as the hallmark principle of the all-charter system. Levin (2008) couples school choice with school autonomy. One goes hand in hand with the other (see Ciolino et al., this volume). Put simply, it makes little sense to provide families with the option to send their children far distances from home if the new schools function in the same fashion as neighborhood schools under the centralized administrative bureaucracy of the OPSB before 2005. This micro-management of individual schools would undermine choice. In terms of educational values, parents choose a specific charter (school mission) that aligns with their values, aspirations, and vocational goals – be they gaining admission into elite universities, a lucrative profession, or exposure and training in the arts. As Levin (2008) states, “the time-honored right of parents is the ability to impart to their children their values, religious beliefs, and political perspectives. This is translated into the quest for the freedom to choose the kind of school that mirrors and reinforces child-rearing practices.” If school leaders are unable to implement these qualities owing to lack of professional autonomy, then choice becomes essentially meaningless.

An abundance of anecdotal evidence suggests that this is, in fact, the case in New Orleans today. The most powerful evidence attesting to this reality is, arguably, the fact that when presented with the option to leave the RSD and return to the OPSB, the overwhelming majority of schools have voted not to do so. Although there is not room in this summary chapter to delve into the drama surrounding the question of returning schools in the RSD to local control in the OPSB, it is important to note the lingering perception, if not organizational reality, of the OPSB as dysfunctional. Whereas parents and teachers might otherwise seem predisposed to a return to local control of schools, there is a pervasive lack of confidence in the OPSB.

In such a situation, it is also important to emphasize the factor of place in educational options and in schooling experiences. A sense of place is crucial to a quality education in general and particularly for pedagogical choice. If such choice is to be meaningful, that sense of place must, like the school mission or model, be differentiated. For example, one of the author’s children has attended schools in New Orleans; Clemson, in rural South Carolina; and Aix-en-Provence, France. The pedagogical and organizational approach to schooling in France was significantly different than those encountered in the United States (both New Orleans and Clemson, North Carolina alike). In France, education is taken completely out of the control of the family. Parents are not allowed in schools except for matters such as scheduled meetings with administrators and classroom visits. In New Orleans, our children spent much time learning about African American history and studying and celebrating African American culture. In Clemson, in contrast, there was a tremendous focus on “The War of Northern Aggression” and its role in history and culture. In
New Orleans, a strongly Catholic community, there were few transgressions of the separation of church and state; in Clemson – a strongly Baptist community – that separation was virtually non-existent (with Christian prayers observed prior to all meetings and events).

Although this is but one parent’s experience, families would generally reason that, given such an absence of diversity in their district schooling options, a more practical strategy would be to attend a neighborhood school, assuming spots for admission were available.

Beyond matters of curriculum and place, universal choice dovetails perfectly with the city’s historic ethos of privatization (Lauria, 1996; Mirón, 1992/2010) as well as its rapid transformation into a libertarian and entrepreneurial political culture following Hurricane Katrina. Although clearly not without shortcomings, poll data and parental surveys have consistently indicated that a majority of citizens, both public school families and those enrolled in private or parochial schools, remain in favor of school choice that removes the limitations of zip code (Cowen Institute, 2014). These families reason that, at least theoretically if not in everyday practice, they have the freedom and wherewithal to send their children to any school they choose.

A TALE OF ONE SCHOOL

In the absence of ethnographic studies (for exceptions, see Boselovic, forthcoming; Sondel, 2013, this volume), we want to illustrate the similarities and differences in one secondary school before and after Katrina – Benjamin Franklin High School, a historically high-achieving college preparatory school. Benjamin Franklin was nationally ranked (top 25) of all secondary schools pre-Katrina.

As a citywide magnet school (see Lauria & Mirón, 2005; Mirón & Lauria, 1998), Benjamin Franklin attracted secondary school students across the city of New Orleans. Students secured admission to the genuinely world-class college preparatory school through successful scores on an admissions test. In turn, its graduates were often rewarded with scholarships and acceptance letters from the most prestigious colleges and universities in the country, including Berkeley, Duke, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. Although the school narrowly focused its mission on achieving a successful college career upon graduation, by no means was it simply an environment for academic achievers. For example, both of Mirón’s daughters, having achieved acceptance into elite University of California campuses, played high school sports. The elder daughter was a member of the girls’ all-state championship volleyball time and semi-finalist state champion soccer team.

In short, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Franklin was a tight-knit community comprised of dedicated parents, alumni, teachers, and students. The school was so attractive that many middle and upper class families in Uptown New Orleans chose Franklin even though they were often able to afford private school tuition costs upwards of $10,000/year. Put simply, if there was any significant dissent inside of the school building this was not detectable to outsiders. This is not the case today.
Fast forward to 2014.

In 2014, Franklin’s faculty and school administration became embroiled in a controversial issue to bring back collective bargaining—unionization—to the school. With the de facto dissolution of the school district owing to the loss of enrollment following Hurricane Katrina, calls for collective bargaining grew mute as the OPSB unilaterally fired over 7,000 classroom teachers and in the process, abolished the collective bargaining agreement UTNO, as discussed above. The demise of UTNO, in effect, brought an end to unionization save for a small professional staff to support UTNO’s reduced footprint on public education in New Orleans (see Mirón, 2008). In addition to the profound loss of morale of the dismissed teachers (Cook, 2010)—the majority of whom were African American and veteran educators—the demise of UTNO meant the loss of institutional and political voice for teachers in the city. Coupled with the decentralization of the school system and the development of charter schools, teachers felt that what little power they did once possess in governance and policy was irrevocably lost. This was largely the case, except (with a few other cases) at Franklin, where teachers voted to unionize in the fall of 2014, apparently due to widespread discontent with the school’s principal (Dreilinger, 2014).

At Franklin, the college-prep school we chronicle above, the institutional loss of voice caused a serious decrease in professional morale. We want to be clear, however. High morale at Franklin pre-2005 was not directly attributable to the existence of UTNO and the collective bargaining agreement. What we can say, more precisely, is that the removal of teachers’ professional voice by dissolving the collective bargaining agreement post-Katrina seems pragmatically tied to teacher unrest. An affirmative vote cast in favor of bringing back the union to Franklin semiotically references a restoration of classroom teachers’ collective voice. On the other hand, as some assert, the absence of a collegial school leader fostered conditions favorable to restoring a union presence at the school. We assert that given Franklin’s historically strong academic culture, its classroom teachers would have found the other means to reclaim their institutional voice and presence. Unionization was simply an expeditious means to accomplish this end.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

In summary, New Orleans has made significant progress, and taken bold strides in improving public education post-2005. There is no doubt that student achievement has increased and that the quality of education improved. The question regarding teaching and learning remains improvement in comparison to what? Pre-2005 achievement scores bordered on abysmal, although as many have indicated, test scores were improving before the storm (Buras, 2011)—prior to the state legislature amending Act 35, thus declaring over 100 schools in the city as “failing.” Indeed, one might observe that the progress on the school reform front mirrors the apparently extraordinary recovery the city as a whole has made since 2005: in
many neighborhoods the quality of life is remarkably better, in others there is scant evidence of anything resembling quality of life. Loss of human dignity is evident.

For the future, we would hope that the city would build on its historical legacy in the arts, jazz in particular. In jazz, as Wynton Marsalis notes, musicians are “forced to listen” to the voices other their fellow musicians (2004). The architects of post-2005 school reform in New Orleans did not need to listen to the voices of the marginalized left homeless and destitute by Hurricane Katrina. It is our worry that only more tragedies such as the hit and run killing of the six-year-old child will force recalibrating some of the unintended consequences of the universal choice model.

Always with an optimistic perspective, we believe that, collectively, we can redesign public education to better serve all families. Borrowing from the tradition of jazz, democratic practice can deepen as a result of correcting the mistakes and building from lessons learned (for a more in-depth discussion of this possibility, see Mirón, Goines, & Boselovic, forthcoming). We can and must design system(s) of public education on the local level that foster creative community collaborations and can instill empathy and quality education for those families in greatest need.

NOTES

1 As a native New Orleanian, one of us (Mirón) prefers to use dates when engaged in discourse regarding Hurricane Katrina. Thus, I use the phrase post 2005, rather than the more conventional post-Katrina.

2 A state appeals court recently ruled that the Orleans Parish School Board overnight dismissal of their employees in the aftermath of Katrina violated due process.

3 We prefer the term “evolution” to describe the widespread changes, rather than “revolution” as used by educational leaders such as former RSD Superintendent, Paul Vallas, and Norman Francis, President of Xavier University. In hindsight, I was wrong when I predicted that New Orleans would not follow the economic and political path undertaken by other major cities such as New York and San Francisco. Neoliberal organizational forms (as seen in contemporary policymaking in the realms of public education and public housing) and the demise of public unions were, perhaps, inevitable. It is evolutionary.

4 The death of the child was so devastating that the City of New Orleans issue the following press release on 8 February 2014, barely a week after the hit and run death: “City Hall is sponsoring a public forum on the safety of school transportation. The forum will include representatives from OPSB, RSD, and BESE and will provide time for parents, educators, and other members of the public to share their concerns about the current state of school transportation. The meeting comes in the wake of the hit-and-run death of an Akili Academy first-grader who was fatally injured as he and three siblings crossed four lanes of traffic to reach their bus stop” (Daley, 2014).

5 For example after a period exceeding two years, OPSB has been unable to name a permanent superintendent of schools.

6 To provide full disclosure one of the co-authors’ children attended “Franklin” (as it was affectionately known by members of its school community).

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2. EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE
IN NEW ORLEANS, 1803–2005

Conflicts over Public Education, Racial Inequality, and Social Status
in Pre-Katrina New Orleans

INTRODUCTION

In the nearly 10 years since Hurricane Katrina, the educational landscape of New Orleans has largely transformed from what can be referred to as a traditional public school system to one that is operated under the valence of public institutions, but is run by a variety of different non-governmental organizations. Although the education reforms enacted in the months and years since the storm have been largely understood in both public and academic discourse as a new experiment in public education, the move toward a more privatized system of educational governance predates Katrina, extends to other American cities, and connects to shifts in social and economic policy more generally that extend beyond the realm of education (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010; Harvey, 2005).

The difference that has characterized New Orleans education policy in the years since Katrina from other urban districts advancing privatization methods of education reform has been a school governance model based on school choice and decentralized operations rather than a portfolio model that emphasizes administrative oversight by a central authority in the development of a variety of new educational choices (Levin, Daschbach, & Perry, 2010). Although a majority of schools are now overseen by the state-level Recovery School District – with the remainder falling under the jurisdiction of the local Orleans Parish School Board – there is no one central authority for the provision of public education in New Orleans.

This transformation of public education and school governance has been seen as cause for hope and celebration for the future of American education by some and a cause for dismay, concern, and criticism by others (Beabout et al., 2008; Brinson, Boast, Hassel, & Kingsland, 2011; Buras, 2011; Hartman & Squires, 2006; Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Kirylo, 2005; Levin et al., 2010; Mirón, 2008; Osborne, 2012; Sondel, 2013). These discussions revolve around many of the issues that define educational reform in other cities as well: the proliferation of charter schools, changes in teacher recruitment and evaluation, and the opening and closing of schools. Although these issues play out in a variety of local contexts, the central
issue can be defined as an ideological disagreement over the public and the private spheres of social life and policy, discursively defined, and what responsibilities and power each holds (or should hold) within American education.

In consequence, often with an intensive focus on outcomes-based data analysis premised upon standardized testing, the outpouring of research that has taken New Orleans as the centerpiece of a new educational model for urban American cities has focused almost exclusively on the city’s recent history in defining success and failure, public and private. Both laudatory and critical perspectives have tended to portray the years immediately preceding the storm as mere background for the educational changes brought about in recent years, rather than as a central, local context over which sweeping reforms have been made. Similarly, both of these perspectives have tended to view the previous schooling system with a monolithic perspective that ignores the historical and social complexities that defined the formation of a public education system in New Orleans and in Louisiana more generally.

To further elucidate the meaning of these recent changes in educational governance and policy, it is essential to work toward developing a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the past and how public education in New Orleans developed within the city landscape. The connotations of public and private that have characterized the development of the public education system in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina are essential for understanding the ramifications of the large-scale overhaul of this system in recent years. In looking at how public education in New Orleans developed in response to certain social, racial, economic, and geographic realities, a clearer picture of the transformation of the public/private distinction that defines contemporary understandings of education reform in the city can come into focus.

This historical analysis is based on the search for a clearer understanding of the public and the private sphere as they have advanced (and receded) not just in the years immediately leading up to Katrina, but also in the two centuries that encompass New Orleans’ status as an American city. The main area of interest in this analysis is the status of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1989) as it relates to the development of educational institutions in New Orleans during this time period. To do this, I begin with a brief discussion of some of the recent literature engaged with critical questions around the public/private character of contemporary education reform and social theory more broadly. In this overview, my focus is specifically on the work of Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) and its intellectual heirs who have developed public sphere theory as a critical tool for understanding charter schooling. From there, a review of some of the literature specifically concerning the history of education, civil rights, and politics more generally – from the local scale of New Orleans to national considerations – brings to light the legacies of those antecedents of current educational reforms and their relevance for understand public education in New Orleans in the present.
Although this analysis is by no means exhaustive, the purpose of engaging with such historical perspectives provides a particular lens through which contemporary policymakers, scholars, and educators might understand the city in a more nuanced manner. The majority of this historical review and analysis is concerned with the years of Reconstruction in Louisiana and the civil rights struggle in New Orleans. Although the second half of the 20th-century is not insignificant in this analysis, I believe it is more important to delve into the years prior, as narratives of urban decay and white flight are generally more well-known and define much analysis of the history of American cities, including New Orleans. Although, as I will argue, the use of public sphere theory in educational research has certain disadvantages, I believe it is a novel theoretical approach to understanding the experiences of education and the development of institutions of education in New Orleans, past and present. In looking at the elements of the past as they connect to the contemporary conflicts and contradictions in education reforms as well as understandings of the public sphere, a greater understanding of how post-Katrina reforms fit into the broader narratives of public education in New Orleans (and beyond) is possible.

PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY AND THE INSTITUTION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICAN LIFE

The Public Sphere as a Framework for Critical Social Analysis

The concept and intellectual history of the public sphere in Western societies is a line of thought that has influenced the work of figures as diverse as Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas and, in consequence, scholars in the fields of critical theory, political science, queer theory, literary studies, cultural history, and education. In consequence, its uses as a theoretical framework are multiple and understandings of the public sphere vary.

In tracing the trajectory of the public sphere from the Greek *polis* through to the rise of bourgeois society, Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) states that the public is a universalistic entity within society that serves as a field of communicative discourse (on the level of language and ideology) and deliberation (social life) between the private realm and the state. The broad purpose of this social entity is to serve as a critical mediating force between the private realm and the state for the advancement of the public good. In his historical analysis, Habermas shows the manner in which this social entity – born in early European capitalist societies through the 18th and 19th centuries – developed and functioned as modes of capitalist production and social discourse transformed the economic and social relations between governments and the new model of citizenship that developed from the theoretical models of the Enlightenment. Habermas ultimately calls into question the vitality and the purpose of the public sphere and its continued ability
to engage in a critical role amid the rise of mass society in the 20th century. As changes in the structures of individual subjectivity, political organization, and cultural diffusion brought about substantial changes in the experience of everyday life and the ways in which individuals engage with society and the state (Adorno, 1951/2005; Fraser, 1997; Jameson, 1992), it is important to maintain any use of the public sphere in contemporary terms in a manner that does not fall into abstractions or, worse, the adoration of some past form of social life embodied with nostalgia.

The universalistic character of Habermas' conception of the public sphere, with all citizens gradually entering into the form of citizenship that is discursively created out of the political structures built around the public sphere, has served as one of the central points of tension in the critical response to Habermas' work. Most notable in the line of inquiry around public sphere theory that developed out of Habermas' work in the tradition of the Frankfurt School has been Fraser's (1997) feminist critique. Engaging with this question of belonging and the dynamics of inequality within the public sphere in different societies, Fraser argues that a more critical and complicated analysis of the public sphere is necessary to account for the modes of economic, racial, and gender inequality inherent in capitalist societies across multiple historical periods (Wilson, 2010). As Warner (2002) notes, although Foucault does not examine the public sphere explicitly, his genealogical critiques of the state and the processes of subjectivation also highlight the dynamics of power inherent within the public sphere.

While this critique does not fundamentally negate the use of public sphere theory to understand social change in capitalist societies, the rise of thinking about counterpublics provides a conceptual tool to further investigate inequalities and social conflict within the public sphere. In his exploration of the nature of publics and counterpublics, Warner (2002) articulates the notion of counterpublics as social networks and relations that incorporate individuals and communities that maintain a subordinate status to mainstream society. The use of this theoretical understanding allows for a more granular analysis of social relations and experiences as it focuses on the language and action of multiple publics within and across societies over time. While thinking about a plurality of publics logically leads to the question of whether such a term as public has any explanatory power, it is the tension of counterpublics with the mainstream of society that brings together a unity, rather than a further fracturing, of different forms of social life and particular subjectivities.

**Public Education as Deliberative Process: Public Sphere Theory and Schooling in the United States**

Within the realm of educational policy in the United States, however, there is a need to deconstruct the term ‘public’ as it often carries connotations of the public sphere as well as public goods. Although it is important to understand the public goods
involved in education (and they are not entirely separated from this discussion), a more concerted focus upon the public sphere specifically, as I will show in the next section, provides a better means for understanding particular historical and cultural conflicts and processes as they relate to public education.

In considering this character of the public sphere as it relates specifically to education policy, recent shifts in education policymaking raise a number of questions related to the efficacy of such a public to act in its own interests. Normative understandings of the traditional public school system which have characterized American society from Horace Mann’s common schools through the Progressive Era of the mid-20th century present public education as a social provision provided by the state for the benefit of both private individuals and the public good, with both being necessary for the health and development of the public sphere and democratic society (Gutmann, 1999). The provision of this public good was itself a (democratic) process, with local school boards and educational policymakers alike being subject to democratic elections rooted in particular local entities. In this sense, although the work of education entailed the interests of both the private (the well-being and democratic engagement of the private citizen) and the public (individuals participating in the democratic process and as members of society to shape policy) (Levin, 2010), it was the public good that was understood to be the social import of educational policymaking.

Recent decades have seen a shift in American educational policy, as well as in social policy more generally, away from the model of a unified public school system, particularly in urban school districts. The provision and process of education as a public good has increasingly fallen within the realm of more complex public/private partnerships and relationships, with new societal and economic interests and individuals having increased influence and power within the public education landscape. Developing in the decades since Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Educational Excellence released the *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983, which brought public attention to a perceived lack of excellence in American education, the ideology of such reforms has commonly been premised on neoliberal conceptions of the public sphere and the public good, with the values of competition, choice, and efficiency taking precedence over democratic and social engagement around schooling (Buras, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011; Lubienski, 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002). This ideological shift, less explicitly, was also adapted largely in districts and schools wherein a general lack of financial and social capital (due in large part to disinvestment in urban areas and decades of conflict around the desegregation of schooling) made the formation of new partnerships and forms of operations attractive to political and civic leaders. Although these considerations will be expanded in the conclusion of this analysis, it is first necessary to understand the historical antecedents to the policy frameworks and ideologies and structures of governance that define education and social policy in the present.
New Orleans became an American city on April 30th, 1803, when the treaty between the United States and France for the Louisiana Purchase was signed. In their landmark educational history, DeVore and Logsdon (1991) observe that the obstacles to developing a stable and beneficial system of public education in New Orleans were unlike those faced in any other city or town in the United States, either in the North or the South. Previously under colonial rule by the French and the Spanish, the city did not have the history of common schools that had begun to appear in the cities and towns of the American Northeast around this time. Similarly, the absorption of the local population into American rule brought about a new form of governance as well as different experiences with regard to language, culture, and history.

One particular element that distinguished New Orleans from other cities was the racial composition and status of its citizens. Long before any other slave community in the United States obtained any grain of freedom, the Creole society of New Orleans presented an American experience truly unlike any other. Based in the Tremé neighborhood in the city’s Sixth Ward, the community of free people of color that lived there, under relative prosperity, developed an intellectual and cultural heritage with roots in ancestries tied to both West African and European traditions. They did so even as Blacks in other parts of the city faced the continuing subjugation of slavery. Although the Creole and slave communities of New Orleans were indeed at odds as a result of their heritage and their economic and social status, their fates would grow to be entwined in certain aspects as the city developed once it became an American entity in the early 19th century. What had been two distinct cultural and historical populations in the city would eventually come to often be understood in the formation of governing policy, as simply ‘Black.’

In his history of education in the American South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Anderson (1988) notes that for formerly enslaved communities, education was foundational to notions of individual and collective social progress within the context of a racially inequitable and racist society. Even though the formal education systems that developed for most African Americans were constructed specifically to gain technical knowledge applicable to low-level jobs, education was often perceived conceptually as a gateway to greater economic mobility and equality. During this period, though, many Black communities, in New Orleans and elsewhere, had to pay to support the creation of their own schooling since the taxation they provided only supported their local white schools (Anderson, 1988).

William C.C. Claiborne, the first territorial governor of Louisiana, also viewed education in the city as essential – for the assimilation of the local population into American society and for the economic development of the port city (DeVore & Logsdon, 1991). Such ambitions for the creation of a public school system from the ground up, based on the principles of prominent educational leaders such as Horace
Mann, were targeted specifically at only one of the three groups of citizens that would appear on the Census of 1810. Almost concurrent with this political ambition was the struggle for freedom among enslaved citizens of New Orleans: the year 1811 would bring about the largest slave revolt to date in American history (Students at the Center, 2011).

As the new American policymakers sought to establish an educational system in a foreign land, the first landmark in the creation of an organized system of education took place in 1858, seventeen years after the state had passed legislation calling for free public education for whites, and just one year after the Supreme Court had heard the case of Dred Scott v. John Sanford. Although millionaire John McDonogh had been dead for eight years, it was not until this time that his will was settled in court and half of his estate was formally given to the city for the education of both white and free Black youth. Over thirty schools would be built in subsequent years across the city that carried his name. Many of these schools operated well into the twenty-first century, although it would be some time before his vision of the education of Black youth would become educational policy.

It was by the act of another wealthy donor, Marie Couvent, that the Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents opened as the first free school for children of color in the city (Baker, 1996). Although it was founded through funds from the 1837 will of Couvent, the Creole community of New Orleans worked to maintain the school’s operation going forward. This development would be characteristic of Black education in the city in the years ahead, as Black children often were only afforded educational opportunity through various means of private and parochial schooling or by so-called public schools which they maintained amidst significant opposition (DeVore & Logsdon, 1991).

Similar to perspectives today on the decentralization of public education in New Orleans, it is easy to perceive at this early time in the city’s history that even if the provision of public education was not structurally decentralized in terms of contemporaneous policies, it was clearly aligned with only a portion of the public sphere of New Orleans in mind – with the Black residents of the city, by philanthropy, community-based organizations, or otherwise, having to struggle to provide for themselves in the provision of education. In this instance, public education in New Orleans was not distinct from other areas of America, whether urban or rural (Anderson, 1988). The years following the Civil War, however, would prove to be a fundamental turning point in the development of a more unified system of public education in New Orleans.

The Years of Reconstruction and the Promise and Peril of Equity around Public Education in New Orleans

It would be in the years of Reconstruction that the public schools of New Orleans would make a progressive transformation that would signal the promise of a more equitable educational future for the citizens of New Orleans. Such legislative
developments during these brief years would be without precedent in other American cities. It would also be during this brief period that the United States would have its first Black governor in Louisiana in P.B.S. Pinchback (1872), and its first Black mayor, in Donaldsville’s Pierre ‘Caliste’ Landry (1868), also in Louisiana (Students at the Center, 2011). The end of the period of Reconstruction, however, brought with it the turning back of many of these changes as policy and political power shifted back to the elite and white constituencies that had developed the governing regime of the city and the state in the antebellum years. Similar to other Southern states during the tumultuous years of Reconstruction, Louisiana would also experience this time as one of brutal social conflict and state and white violence against Black populations (Foner, 1988).

In the brief time between the beginning of the Civil War and the informal end of the Reconstruction era, Black communities across New Orleans, as well as across Louisiana more generally, were able to establish schools to forward the educational development of their own children. The Code Noir laws established in 1724, while New Orleans was under French rule, limited education for Blacks to nothing more than basic literary skills necessary for religious observance. But in the years during and immediately after the Civil War, Blacks in New Orleans prospered more than many other Black communities across the nation. This push for equality was so successful that in 1868, the Louisiana state legislature passed Article 135, an amendment to the state constitution that ordered the abolition of all-white schools (Baker, 1996). These progressive developments that signaled the possibility of improved schooling and civic life more generally in the state were met with vehement and often violent reactions on the part of many in New Orleans’ white communities. In the years immediately following the ratification of Article 135, the number of whites attending private schools in New Orleans increased dramatically (Baker, 1996). In noting this substantial group action by many white New Orleanians, it is important to note that the trajectory normally referred to as ‘white flight’ in discussions of American suburbanization and post-Brown era shifts in city demographics was something that played out over a much larger arc of time in New Orleans (Baker, 1996; Buras, 2011; Fussell, 2007; Rasheed, 2006).

Consequently, in 1874, the city’s White League division, in tandem with local business leaders, was able to take back power at the level of state government. Following this tide, as President Hayes pulled out federal Reconstruction troops from the city in 1877, he was, as Baker (1996) notes, “in effect pulling out federal support of Black’s civil rights and leaving the freedman with nothing between him and the white southerner’s rage” (p. 24). This thin-to-non-existent line that existed between Black and white communities in subsequent years, as would be expected, came to also define racial inequalities in the city’s school system, with violence and legal wrangling standing as the dominant white leadership’s major means of resisting moves to support the education of Blacks or to desegregate the city’s schools.
The substantial loss of power in Black communities in the years after Reconstruction was a formidable setback to the efforts to create a more equitable urban environment in New Orleans. At the dawn of the 20th century, the schools allocated for Black students crumbled under the edict of separate but equal logic grounded in the Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. More fundamentally, since the efforts to create public schooling before the Civil War were largely supported by the city’s non-native commercial elite, local support for the provision of education in the white community of New Orleans was relatively weak (DeVore & Logsdon, 1991). Unity of agreement about a public education system premised on the integration efforts of the Reconstruction years was largely absent.

Also absent at this time was the prospect of federal intervention at the state or local level. Subsequently, as Blacks occupied a more marginalized position in New Orleans, white city officials felt largely unfettered in their efforts to develop a system of schooling suited to their needs and premised on the exclusion of Black students and families. The dual system of education that largely characterized American schooling up to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 would also prevail in the schooling experiences of the people of New Orleans.

In addition to a lack of direct federal intervention in matters related to integration, the Orleans Parish School Board had – from the early 20th century through to the 1940s – the authority to determine taxes in all educational matters. This flexibility also detached the school system from other political developments of this era, but often made the struggle to advance major educational initiatives more difficult independently of school leadership. Although this would allow for the development of new facilities and improved opportunities for white students and communities in the city as more students continued their education into high school, the realities of this bifurcated system further isolated the Black communities of New Orleans without substantial educational resources and opportunities. Without federal support, and with minimal efforts of the Orleans Parish School Board to alleviate the often dismal quality of Black schools, much less to move toward integration, Black communities within the city were often, once again, left with inadequate educational resources and abysmal facilities (Baker, 1996; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991; Fussell, 2007; Rasheed, 2006). At this time, as before Reconstruction, local control of schools was subjected to the prevailing policies of a white educational governance regime, with the concurrent and continuing decay of Black schools.

As Baker (1996) argues, the battles against racial inequality, in education and in daily life more generally, were subsequently waged largely in courtrooms from this period through to the 1960s. Arguments made by unsympathetic whites and segregationist organizations, in New Orleans and elsewhere, grew increasingly weak in the build-up to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954, as it became clear that the creation of truly equal schooling facilities and resources in
a segregated system would have, beyond concerns of morality or justice, simply been too expensive to maintain. Professional estimates in the 1950s for such an arrangement, made by school experts from outside of Louisiana, ran into the hundreds of millions of dollars (Baker, 1996). And yet, in the years after the nation’s schools were ordered to desegregate ‘with all deliberate speed,’ policymaking at both the local and state levels crafted new legal structures to combat the decline of segregation policies and bolster the power of white communities.

Before the Brown decision, Governor James F. Byrnes of South Carolina had already publicly made plans to give the state’s public schools over to private control in the case of segregation becoming declared unconstitutional (Baker, 1996). In this push toward educational privatization in the American South, and in New Orleans in particular, a variety of mechanisms could be advocated for or implemented by state legislatures to enforce the maintenance of racially unequal school facilities.³ In the eyes of fearful whites, what was at stake was not just the schools but also the security of their civil and political domination more generally. In maintaining the ideology that that any policies oriented to desegregation ‘would transfer the darkness [of Blacks] to white skins and white souls’” (Baker, 1996, p. 219), the Louisiana state legislature passed laws in the late 1950s to keep Blacks out of the city’s white schools if not explicitly by race, then by matters of “public health, morals, better education, and the peace and good order of the state” (Baker, 1996, p. 226). As with educational laws before Reconstruction as far back as the French Code Noir, the ideological focus of developing public education was conscientiously centered on methods of exclusion within the public and political spheres.

State legislator Willie Rainach, in tandem with segregationist Leander Perez, led the push in the Louisiana state legislature for even more means of excluding Black students from the city schools through state intervention and the advocacy of privatization measures. Perez had long argued for the avenue of private schools of some form to avoid any compromise on issues of racial equality, and in working with the influential Rainach, his vision began to be carried out in 1958 as the state legislature passed a number of measures to weaken the power of Black communities in New Orleans. Measures passed by the state legislature in 1958 included legislation to allow the governor to close any school that integrated, the provision of state funds to any students seeking to leave the traditional public schools, and, more fundamentally, the granting of power to the state to control all schools. These measures, though, were carried out in a cynical spirit, desperate efforts by the contemporary Louisiana political powers to maintain the racial and economic societal arrangements that had defined the segregated South. Within a few years, many Americans would grow more familiar with this legacy, as Norman Rockwell’s famous painting The Problem We All Live With (1964) depicted the scene on the streets of New Orleans as a Black student, Ruby Bridges, walked to the previously all-white William Frantz Elementary School in the Ninth Ward on November 14th, 1960.
Although the first attempts at integration at William Frantz, as well as at McDonogh 19 (also in the Ninth Ward), subsequently led to opportunities for Black students to integrate other schools, resistance to these efforts by white families continued to be substantial – and proved to have a lasting legacy. As Weider (1987) observes, although New Orleans had a reputation for being a relatively cosmopolitan city of the time and some within the city liked to believe that it had relatively stable race relations compared with other places in the American South, the fight to desegregate schools was but the last in a series of social and political movements to integrate the public entities of New Orleans, after public transportation and public libraries. Indeed, beyond the legal and social struggles around the Brown decision, it would also take the efforts around the ten-year Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board case to eventually, with the force of law, for the desegregation initiative to move forward in the city (Baker, 1996; Douglas, 2005; Muller, 1976). As the difficulty in forcing the school district to even devise a plan for the eventual integration of New Orleans’ public schools highlights, the story of the city going forward would not be one of swift moves towards greater racial (or economic) justice and equality.

Integration and Life in New Orleans Following Brown and Bush

Beyond the fiercely contested realm of the city’s schools, the post-Brown era in New Orleans marked a general decline in the city’s growth in population and in its general economic productivity – phenomena reflective of the stagnant developments in integration within the city’s schools. Whereas the first half of the century saw increases in population due to migration, this trend decreased close to the 1950s and, in combination with the move to the suburbs (and private schools) that followed after the first attempts at integration, this trend was exacerbated (Rasheed, 2006). As in many other American cities, the federal interventions in education and housing policy that aimed to alleviate inequality as part of the War on Poverty would demonstrate only limited success in the second half of the twentieth century (Orfield & Gándara, 2009).

After the New Orleans school system reached its highest level of student enrollment in the early 1970s, the ensuing decade would show the most marked decline in white investment in the city (Cowen Institute, 2008). While other major urban areas in the nation, particularly in the northern Rust Belt region, had seen great rises and subsequent declines as a result of the transformation of industrial manufacturing and production, New Orleans had never experienced such developments in the first place. As emphasized by a number of scholars who observed the students who would be displaced and then struggle to return to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans’ economy was (both before and after the storm) largely based on a service economy that relied heavily upon the city’s tourism industry based on local cuisine and culture (Barrios, 2011; Dingerson, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Levin et al., 2010; Torregano & Shannon, 2009). With many white residents having already left
the city due to concerns related to education, the outpouring of residents from the city continued as the number of attractive middle-class jobs fell further behind those in other metropolitan areas (Fussell, 2007). The major trends of the latter half of the twentieth century, then, can be seen as the growth in proportion of the city’s Black population and the decrease in economic opportunity for those who stayed in the city. Both of these trends led to a general decline in the city’s viability going into the 21st century – a matter that would be of central importance in considerations of just how New Orleans would be re-built in the aftermath of Katrina. Fussell (2007) paints a picture of New Orleans in the years leading up to the storm:

On the eve of Katrina, New Orleans laid claim to a host of dubious records. In 2005, 24.5 percent of residents lived below the poverty level compared with 13.3 percent for the United States as a whole; 17.7 percent had less than a complete high school education compared with 15.8 percent for the United States; the median household income was $30,711 compared with $46,242 for the United States. (p. 852)

It should be understood, then, that while many American cities suffered from the tension of deindustrialization starting in the 1950s, New Orleans’ development during this time had particular origins and took a markedly different route, rooted specifically within social unrest in the public sphere related to racial stratification and the lack of educational opportunities.

Within the context of this general decline of the city, it is not difficult to imagine the plight of the public schools at the turn of the 21st century. Oft plagued by cases of corruption, deteriorating school conditions, and low levels of student achievement, the Orleans Parish School Board presided over a public education system wherein students were substantially poorer than students across Louisiana as well as the nation more generally, consisting of a population that was 93.4% Black (Casserly, 2006). The demographics of the student body of those in the city’s public schools “translated into an enrollment that was more than twice as poor and about five times as Black as that of the average school system nationwide” (Casserly, 2006, p. 200). Despite the increasingly difficult situation that the city faced in these years, however, the public schools were beginning to show some hints of improvement in the years before Katrina. In light of the aforementioned controversies related to corruption and poor governance, a newly-elected school board began to make amendments to a system in the 2003-2004 school year that, both then and after the hurricane, policymakers would largely abandon as a hopeless case (Levin et al., 2010), offering little more than what had already been tried in the past.

THE SOCIAL DIVISIONS OF EDUCATION, RACIAL INEQUALITY, AND BELONGING AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA

Most of the people around us belong to our world not directly, as kin or comrades or in any other relation to which we could give a name, but as
strangers. How is it that we nevertheless recognize them as members of our world? We are related to them (and I am to you) as transient participants in common publics, potentially addressable in impersonal forms. Most of us would find it nearly impossible to imaging what social life without publics would look like. (Warner, 2002, p. 7–8, emphasis mine)

If belonging is at the center of communication and engagement within the public sphere, Hurricane Katrina brought about a substantial break in this belonging – both in education and in civic life more generally. Measures to allow for charter schools, voucher programs, and privatization in education more broadly had gained some traction in Louisiana and elsewhere well before the storm (Mirón, 2008). Katrina, however, provided a unique opportunity to reconsider urban policy as it related to schooling, as well as housing and health in line with a neoliberal framework that posited market-based solutions as the answers to social problems (Buras, 2011; Klein, 2007; Saltman, 2007; Sondel, 2013).

The most significant development for the purposes of this study was Act 35, the law that the Louisiana legislature passed in the months after the storm to bring 112 out of the 120 schools in New Orleans under the purview of the state-level Recovery School District (RSD) rather than the local Orleans Parish School Board. Concurrent with this development was the firing of 7,500 teachers and staff and the loss of their collective bargaining agreement – a substantial blow to teacher organizing as well as to the teaching profession.

Both of these actions disproportionately affected the Black population of New Orleans. Black students were 92.50% of the public school population in the year before Katrina (in contrast to 90.00% in 2009-2010 and 85.00% in 2013-2014) (Cowen Institute, 2010; 2014). As many of these schools were taken over by the RSD, engagement with schooling for these families became more aligned with the market mechanisms put in place to manage the operation with schools – namely, they were given the choice of schools to send their children to and, if they did not like a particular school, they were now empowered to choose another school anywhere in the city. The trade off of school choice managed by a state-level entity for democratic engagement with school policy at the local level is still a recurring item of contention between families, researchers, and school reform advocates (Huff, 2013, this volume; Sondel & Boselovic, 2014).

Like the student population of New Orleans pre-Katrina, the city’s teaching force was predominantly Black – standing as one of the central means of employment for the Black middle class. Though some of these teachers would find their way back into the cities’ schools, many would not be re-hired, much less given the support to come back to the city (see Cook, 2010). As Adrienne Dixson observes, a paradigm of teaching and learning premised upon “intergenerational exchange of wisdom and energy” was abandoned as young, inexperienced teachers were brought into staff city schools (cited in Carr, 2013, p. 120).
These new realities of educational governance and the teaching force were largely shaped, concurrent with policy, in the proliferation of charter schools in the city. The option to create charter schools in Louisiana was established in law in 1995 and by the 2013-2014 school year, 91% of public school students in New Orleans attended charter schools (Cowen Institute, 2014). As the local school board oversaw fewer schools and the RSD sought to position itself less as an educational provider and more as a support system for schools, non-profit organizations such as New Schools for New Orleans were largely responsible for shaping the trajectory of charter school development, as more and more schools were turned over to charter management organizations.

At the same time, and often overlooked in discussions of the post-Katrina reforms, New Orleans would still be home to the largest share of school-age children in private schools in the nation – with nearly one in four school-age children attending neither the new charter schools or the city’s remaining traditional public schools in the 2013-2014 school year (Kolko, 2014). Most of these students in private schools attended one of the many Catholic schools in the city (for a more in-depth look at this issue and Catholic education in New Orleans, see MacGregor & Fitzpatrick, this volume).

The question of enrollment and demographics at public versus private schools in this period has largely shaped the educational experiences of students. In consequence, significant divisions have appeared within a decentralized school system that relies upon parents and families to choose schools and navigate the social networks necessary to enroll and support their children in these schools. Rational actor models of how families navigate this system largely ignore the contexts in which this navigation takes place. Similarly, focusing on individual students’ and schools’ performances on standardized tests led to a focus on developing metrics lacking scientific rigor to measure school performance and make decisions about which schools would stay open and which schools would be allowed to take over failing schools (Sondel, 2013).

It is within a framework that emphasizes individual choice over collective good and public, democratic engagement that New Orleans approaches the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. While much attentions remains – and rightly so – on the city’s high number of charter schools and the governance models that they entail, the still substantial number of students enrolled in private schools should remind us of the enduring hyper-segregation that defines schooling in New Orleans, as it does in so many other cities.

Many cities are turning to New Orleans as a model of public education reform across the country, a model premised and structured upon a decentralized and fractured network of schools. This development and ideological framework for education reform bears significant consequences for issues of educational equity as well as the matters of belonging with which I began this section. Without a form of learning that is premised in recognizing, respecting, and fostering the interwoven experiences of individual students and families – what connects students into the
life of a community larger than themselves – the implications for educational equity within the public sphere are dire.

LOOKING AHEAD: INTERROGATING THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION REFORM

Although it is not commonly discussed in the contemporary literature on education in New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina was not, in fact, the city’s first or only major encounter with extreme weather. Not surprisingly, both of the city’s other two major storms were also exacerbated by the severe ravages of racial and economic inequality that were the realities in which these storms, like Katrina, took place. After the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, in which thousands of Black citizens were displaced from their homes in a disorganized and inhumane fashion under the leadership of President Calvin Coolidge and the Red Cross, W.E.B. DuBois had this to say of those that survived: “Let them ride, run, and crawl out of this hell. There is no hope for the black man there today” (cited in Lewis, 2005, p. 19). And again in 1965, Hurricane Betsy ravaged the Mississippi Delta region, causing the destruction of communities and the displacement of many disadvantaged Black citizens. In the course of this storm as well, medical and evacuation services were severely limited for Black citizens lacking the financial means to evacuate the city.

In kind, just as the experience of Hurricane Katrina was defined by the city’s history of racial inequality, the creation of a fundamentally different system of public education in the city since 2005 has also developed out of specific political, economic, and social conditions. These factors continue to influence educational policy on the local level, even as educational governance is perceived as post-historical and post-ideological.

In looking upon the history of the institution of public education in New Orleans – as well as the political, racial, and social conflicts that entailed its formation – the lens of public sphere theory provides ample opportunities for understanding not just a macro-level social analysis of history, but the relationship between the dynamics of law, culture, violence, and power that shaped the development of New Orleans as an American city. Understanding the work of those who fought to provide adequate resources and opportunities for the education of Black children as a coherent counterpublic highlights the manner in which different struggles in Louisiana throughout the 19th and 20th centuries concerned with a multitude of political and personal struggles intersected to produce societal change and lay the foundation for present conflicts around education and social life more generally.

The distinctions between the public sphere in New Orleans and the private qualities of education, however, become blurred in this analysis. Returning to the foundations of public sphere theory, it is important to note once again that Habermas (1962/1989) concludes his foundational work by positing that the rise of mass society in the 20th
century marked the decline of the influence of the public sphere on state power as well as social and political institutions. Although the question of the aptness of this question for social sciences research more generally is beyond the scope of this study, the framework of public sphere theory, in this instance, provides a distinct viewpoint through which to understand the relationship between the development of public education as an institution and societal conflict, racial inequality, and change more generally.

The major focus in approaching such a question in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, then, is what public engagement around education consists of now. I would argue that the ideological framework of neoliberalism that has guided post-Katrina reforms, broadly speaking, has led to a largely tenuous relationship between schools and communities that, while substantially weakened during the second half of the twentieth century, had served as a foundation for change beyond individual schools.

In consequence, it will continue to be through democratic contestation over public education – in terms of what kind of oversight of schools is maintained and who is able to influence policy and practice – that the possibility of a renewed sense of public engagement and communicative discourse can be found. What this will look like in the context of New Orleans in the early twenty-first century will be substantially different from the original conception of the public sphere posited by Habermas (1962/1989). It is only within a framework of education that is rooted in lived experience and fosters schools that engage with the communities of which they are a part that better educational experiences in New Orleans can come about.

NOTES
1 91% of students in New Orleans’ public schools attended charter schools during the 2013-2014 school year (Cowen Institute, 2014).
2 According to Fussell (2007), the categories of white, free people of color (Creoles), and African slaves each represented approximately the same percentage of the city’s population.
3 Although the Creole and Black citizens of New Orleans and Louisiana more generally were able to garner such support to amend the state constitution, the city itself would not see a Black mayor until the late 1970s (Ernest Nathaniel Morial), or a Black school superintendent until 1985 (Everett J. Williams).
4 Before he came into the national spotlight in this landmark case, Homer A. Plessy was a resident of Tremé and an active member of the Comité des Citoyens, an organization that garnered large support from all areas of New Orleans in the fight for civil rights (Baker, 1996).
5 Perhaps the most notable of these cases was in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Unable to sell the public schools to a private operator to maintain their segregated status, local and state policymakers shut down public schools in the county from 1959 to 1964 (Hicks & Pitre, 2010).
6 The complaint that established this case was filed in federal district court in 1952 and was taken up, in part, by the United States Supreme Court in 1962.
7 Disaggregating the data on poverty reveals the racial inequalities that pervaded the city at this time: whereas only 10.06% of white residents lived below the poverty line, 30.00% of Black residents did on the eve of Katrina (United States Census, 2005).
8 For an example of what this has looked like in the particular context of Ferguson, see Joseph, 2015.
REFERENCES


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