

A Review of

SCHOOL REFORM, CORPORATE STYLE: CHICAGO, 1880-2000

Dorothy Shipps, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. Pp. xiv, 294.

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The businessman is everywhere; he fills the coffers of the political parties; he owns or controls the influential press and the agencies of mass culture; he sits on university boards of trustees and on local school boards; he mobilizes and finances cultural vigilantes; his voice dominates the rooms in which the real decisions are made.

—Richard Hofstadter, “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life”

Dorothy Shipp’s monograph on the history of school reform in Chicago from the late 19th to the end of the 20th century focuses on the crucial role played by the corporate sector not only in setting the agenda for the city’s public schools, but also in cementing the ethos of management and efficiency as a tool for thinking, understanding, and shaping school reform. In other words, the corporate world was successful not only in setting public policy, but in creating the very categories to be used in evaluating school reform. Shipps’ strategy to locate Chicago’s corporate world at the center of school reform promises to enlarge perspectives for American historians on the role of corporate elites in civic politics, a political constituency, Shipps reminds us, that has seldom been required to justify or account for their actions not only in Chicago, but in the nation as a whole. Yet Shipps’ story of school reform is not one of success, but of failure. Shipps argues that, historically, the antipathy between unions and business elites has impeded the formation of a useful partnership that, had it been able to work out, would have been “unbeatable.”¹ Racial disparities in school performance are a legacy of unresolved social tensions manifested due to the historical failure of business and labor groups to establish successful cross-class coalitions.²

Business attempts at shaping school reform were not successful at first. The first major effort at shaping the city’s educational system at the turn-of-the-century failed. The dominant reform agenda of the corporate world termed managerialism, the efficient and scientific management of schools, was defeated. Enthused by the example of Germany’s two-tiered system of schools, which most members thought had “accelerated [Germany’s] industrial development,”³ business elites fought assiduously for a dual system of education, where vocational education was to be an entirely separate administrative realm controlled by industry to insure the availability of a reliable supply of young workers. Labor groups emphasized a different set of ideals: worker’s democracy in governance, social change through education, and equal access by all students to the highest levels of public schooling. John Dewey, at that time teaching at the University of Chicago’s newly created Department of Education, criticized the corporate

¹ Dorothy Shipps, *School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago, 1880-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), x.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

plan claiming it would intensify the separation of social classes and racial groups, insisting that vocational education's basic goal was to transform the realities of the existing industrial system not to promote them. The corporate leaders' first major effort at shaping the city's educational system thus failed as the dual system was rejected.

Yet, Shipp adds, corporate leaders fared much better in their advocacy of centralization and bureaucratization during the Progressive era, unleashing their most significant ideological weapon: the ethics of efficiency and scientific management as instruments for the reorganization of schools along business principles. The teachers' union, the CTF, opposed centralized management and the efficiency ethos, proposing instead a child-centered philosophy that valorized the teacher-student relationship, a strategy which implied that power should be centered on teachers and their parents, not bureaucrats or corporations. The 1897 Harper Commission, appointed by the mayor, moved to recognize important features of the corporate model such as the need for professionals and business managers in the administration of schools. Corporate leaders emerged victorious with the passage of the Otis Law of 1917. By creating the office of business manager and making the Superintendent the equivalent of a corporate leader, the school system was centralized and professionalized.⁴ During the next fifty years, the ethos of efficiency and business management became entrenched in city politics and educational decision-making.

The class paradigm that framed city coalitions changed dramatically after the Depression, as race reconfigured city politics. As the era progressed, continuing African American migration to Chicago and white flight to suburban areas resulted in a black majority in the city. Yet, African Americans were effectively marginalized from access and influence in City Hall, an exclusion promoted not only by the mechanics of machine politics, but by the racial fears of the white population of Chicago as a whole. Business groups felt obliged to assist mayors in his struggle with civil rights groups promoting organizational and managerial solutions to the city's racial problems. African Americans, who faced resistance from labor groups, were harmed by the failure of the CTU to align their politics with the civil rights movement, strengthening the ability of the mayor to shape the alliance of labor and corporate groups in opposition to the civil rights movement. City politics were driven by a "vision of Chicago as a white, middle-class city that could not sustain a change in its demographics without challenging its basic social structure."⁵ This coalition insulated the school system from any substantial change for fifty years, the author argues. As labor and business became governing partners, African Americans were shut out of the mayor's office and deprived of any power.

Not even the election of Chicago's first black major, Harold Washington, prevented the power of the corporate sector from growing. As mayor, he focused on education in order to bring business groups and his black constituency together. While education was to expand social and employment opportunities, neighborhood development programs would improve the economic viability of the community. Yet, his premature death offered new opportunities to the corporate sector. Tensions in the city between middle-class African Americans who had gained access to the civil bureaucracy and the low-income groups of Washington's coalition, and the dire financial straits of Chicago's finances, led business to offer a fiscal bailout in exchange for new corporate based initiatives and cross-racial coalitions that worked again to the detriment of African Americans. Decentralization and accountability became the new buzzwords

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

as business allied themselves with white and Latino groups to push for a decentralization of the system and promote accountability. Middle-class white sectors also found renewal in the production of a local, racially “neutral,” and “anti-bureaucratic” ideology.⁶ During the last decade of the 20th century, corporate executives consolidated their power in the mayor’s office by promoting the latest management techniques as a solution to the racial problems in education, consolidating their power within their coalition of Latino and white middle-class sectors. Accountability and sanctions for low performance castigated Latino and African American students disproportionately. As the new mayors of the period aimed to please the corporate sector, business leaders returned the compliment by bolstering the reputation and stability of City Hall.

What was the result of almost a century of corporate involvement in schooling in Chicago? Not only did schools fail Latino and African American students, while corporate power increased, but performance has also lacked: corporate agendas have not been guided by student’s needs or civic-minded pedagogies of teaching and learning. Shipps argues that only by rethinking a new alliance between parents and teachers can reforms that are effective be implemented and a coalition for lasting change come about.

Shipps’ monograph suffers from the strict class-based analysis of America’s social policies favored by many historians of education. Although Shipps’ narrative clearly distinguishes between class and racial paradigms in Chicago’s history, the analysis could have used a broader national context. Only the arrival of African-Americans to Chicago in great numbers permitted the class-based politics of the city to manifest their racial character. An insertion of immigration history could have revealed how important the assimilation of European immigrants to American culture was to the history of the city, as it was this event that established the conditions for the reconfiguration of union and corporate alliances along a racial line. Race was not a factor that manifested itself at some point in Chicago or the nation’s history, but the very foundation for the social hierarchies of the nation. A race-based analysis then could explain not only why the white middle-class pushed for reforms that discriminated against African-Americans, but also how groups that belonged to the same social class—such as Latinos, for example—could be used as coalition partners against African-Americans. Since Reconstruction, the inability to unite groups along class interest due to fractures in the racial landscape of America is a historical issue reflected yet unexplored by Shipps’ class-based analysis. The history of America’s labor unions has been decisively shaped by histories of race.

Furthermore, given Shipps’ corporate focus, one may ask: is the ethos of efficiency and managerialism truly reflective of actual corporate practices? Or is it produced in the very process of deployment as a social ideology? Within the wider fabric of the nation’s history, corporate ideologies have had in themselves a racial character or, at the very least, a character reflective of the racial histories of the nation. As a set of ideas produced by a very distinctive racial group, occupying a unique position in the world economy, the ethos of efficiency and managerialism, for all its apolitical qualities, is a racial ideology. The use of business practices and ideas as models for thinking about the nation and the solution of social problems is still not a well-developed idea. The seemingly apolitical nature of the discourse and the flexibility and fluidity of its core concepts, though, have lent it an unusual historical force.

Shipps’ analysis certainly reminds us that the workings of American corporations move beyond the confines of the business domain. In a world where almost no social practice is outside the market

⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

mechanisms that structure our economic lives, the very distinction between a business realm and a public policy realm is certainly in need of rethinking and redefinition. Shipps' study demonstrates that corporate ideologies, in shaping public policies, frame the meanings of the world we live in. This is a meticulously researched monograph. Its use of archival material, interviews, and secondary sources is exhaustive. Although intended for historians of education and public policy scholars, historians of American history in general would lose a great deal if they were to ignore it.