Readings for March 24 2019

For this Sunday the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the March 21 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 12 "The King and I," about Chris Christie and his treatment by Trump, the Kushners, Bannon, et al.

Page 37, "The Uncivil War Over Schools," about racism and other issues in the public schools, especially in Chicago

The group meets in the parlor of the religious education building next to the church. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion. All are welcome!

A copy of the readings is attached.

The King and I
Fintan O'Toole MARCH 21, 2019 ISSUE
Let Me Finish: Trump, the Kushners, Bannon, New Jersey, and the Power of In-Your-Face Politics
by Chris Christie
Hachette, 420 pp., $28.00
Team of Vipers: My 500 Extraordinary Days in the Trump White House
by Cliff Sims
St. Martin's, 360 pp., $29.99

Eduardo Munoz Alvarez/AFP/Getty Images
Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump and New Jersey governor Chris Christie at a fund-raising event, Lawrenceville, New Jersey, May 2016
Perhaps the defining moment of the Trump presidency occurred before it had even begun, two days after his election. Since May 2016, Chris Christie, then governor of New Jersey, had been head of the transition team planning for the takeover of power if Trump won in November. Given the candidate's complete lack of experience in public office, this process was even more important than usual. Trump himself, however, did not think so. In his self-pitying memoir Let Me Finish, a title that soon becomes the reader's prayer, Christie records that "as far back as Labor Day," the prospective president told him, "Chris, you and I are so smart, and we've known each other for so long, we could do the whole transition together if we just leave the victory party two hours early!" But Christie plowed on, and two days after that party, he arrived at Trump Tower to present a "carefully crafted, thirty-volume transition plan." His team of 140 people had spent nearly six months designing for Trump "an entire federal government in his image and likeness." It included shortlists of pre-vetted candidates for all the top jobs in the administration, as well as timetables for action on Trump's signature policies and the drafts of executive orders.

What followed seems, on Trump's part, gleefully sadistic. Christie was a big figure in the Trump campaign: the first serving senior officeholder to endorse and legitimize his candidacy. His star had fallen since his stunning landslide reelection in New Jersey in 2013, but he was still, as the Republican governor of a deep blue state, a figure of real political substance. He also imagined that Trump had been a close personal friend since 2002. Yet when he arrived at Trump Tower to present his thirty binders of plans for the new administration, he was met by Steve Bannon. Bannon told Christie that he was being fired with immediate effect, "and we do not want you to be in the building anymore." His painstaking work was literally trashed: "All thirty binders were tossed in a Trump Tower dumpster, never to be seen again." Are they, one wonders, now rotting away gently somewhere in the wastelands of New Jersey, like the bodies of disposable characters in The Sopranos?

How are we to understand this extraordinary episode? Is it an act of unalloyed personal malice, the emasculation of a Trump-lite wannabe by the real silverback? Or is it a primarily political act, the trashing of the transition plans as a prelude to the trashing of government itself under Trump?1 To ask such questions is to forget that the one thing Trump shares with the feminist movement is the belief that the personal is political—and in his case very much vice versa. Poor John Adams may have imagined that he and his fellow American revolutionaries were founding a government of laws, not of men, but Trump's ideal is a government not even of men, but of a man—his own unprecedented and astonishing self.

Trump's declaration in February of a national emergency to allow him to build his border wall regardless of the views of Congress was consistent with his obvious desire for monarchial powers. The organization of his White House, as his acolyte and former presidential assistant Cliff Sims describes in his memoir, Team of Vipers, is not that of a managerial hierarchy, with clear lines of responsibility and reporting. It is that of a royal court in which everything revolves around the person of the monarch: "The real org chart…was basically Trump in the middle and everyone he personally knew connected to him—like a hub and its spokes." As Sims puts it, "Everything was personal to Trump—everything."

The most pitiful recurring motif in Christie's inadvertently comic tale of self-delusion is the repeated insistence that he and "my friend Donald" are personal equals. What he wants us to believe is that "my unique kinship with the president" was the mutual regard of the twin titans of what the subtitle of his memoir calls "in-your-face politics." He himself was "a genuine national force"; so was Donald. He would, he strongly implies, have become president had Trump not blocked his path. (He claims, for example, that "if he hadn't been there…I would have won New Hampshire," even though he finished sixth, with 7 percent of the vote.) Even after Trump destroyed him in the primaries and Christie threw in his lot with his conqueror, the campaign was, in his eyes, a joint enterprise: "being his peer was a key part of the role that I played"; "this was a peer relationship."

In truth, Christie comes across in Let Me Finish more like a naive ingenue being trifled with by a cynical lothario, a Cécile to Trump's Valmont who still, after being cruelly exploited and

abandoned, does not understand the nature of his dangerous liaison. It would, to inflate Oscar Wilde's claim about the death of Little Nell, take a heart of stone not to howl with laughter at some of his lines about Trump: "He told me he loved me." "We've got to be together, you and me," Donald reassures him, and later, "You know how I feel about you." The lovestruck Chris responds, "I could help him, and he needed me." He is promised diamonds—the vice-presidency and then the office of attorney general—and eventually settles for the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee. When Trump sends a minion, Reince Priebus, to tell him that he's not getting that either, Christie's account of his own response is a full-on teenage flounce: "Whatever, I shrugged as Reince practically sprinted to Donald's office."

So, indeed, the trashing of Christie's transition plan was personal. It takes a heroic lack of self-awareness on Christie's part not to see that he functioned purely as a test of Trump's absolute power—this guy is a two-time governor but I can humiliate him time and again and he will come back for more, still convinced that I really love him. Yet this abusive relationship is also deeply political. In an authoritarian regime, Christie's delusion that he could be a peer of the Trump realm had to be crushed. The great leader has no peers.

The personal and the political meet in the quality at the heart of Trump's presidency: unpredictability. Christie's original sin, the reason why he had to be banished from the Eden of Trump Tower and his thirty binders filed in the dumpster, is that he threatened to erase Trump's most precious quality. He had the temerity to think he could make what he calls the "unpredictable celebrity businessman" into a predictable president: "I could help to organize a government for Donald." To organize a government would be to take away impulsiveness, volatility, capriciousness—and where would Trump be without them? Christie's plan would have placed qualified people in senior government jobs, where they might have applied experience and expertise instead of obeying the will of the leader. But it would also have made the presidency predictable: "We had a day-one plan and a 100-day plan once the administration started. We had a 200-day plan after that." This was even more delusional than the belief that Donald loved him.

Trump cannot function as a dictator—there are still too many constitutional and civic constraints on him—but he thinks and behaves like one. And this contradiction of an authoritarian in a democratic system turns upside down one of the central qualities of dictatorship: the monopoly on predictability. Eric Hoffer wrote that "when a Stalin or a Hitler can predict the future because he has the power to make his predictions come true, the life of the average man becomes unpredictable. It is with prediction as it is with wealth: there is so much of it in a society, and when one person has most of it there is little left for others."2 In a true dictatorship, the leader owns all the predictability—while he knows his orders will be carried out, those subject to the orders have to live in a radically capricious world.

Trump undoubtedly craves those powers. In his sycophantic but surprisingly astute, well-written, and often illuminating account of his work on Trump's campaign and then in the White House, Sims sums up Trump's agenda for his second year in office as "looking for more opportunities to

take executive actions wherever he felt inclined." But those inclinations are too often frustrated. He has the manner and the attitudes of the dictator but not the powers. So he has to turn this particular quality of authoritarian government on its head. The great dictators create a monopoly on predictability. Trump seeks a more modest monopoly on unpredictability.

Central to Trump's claim to a monopoly on unpredictability is his belief in the primacy of instinct over intelligence. In his 1987 best seller The Art of the Deal, written for him by Tony Schwartz, he insists that

more than anything else, I think deal-making is an ability you're born with. It's in the genes. I don't say that egotistically. It's not about being brilliant. It does take a certain intelligence, but mostly it's about instincts. You can take the smartest kid at Wharton, the one who gets straight A's and has a 170 IQ, and if he doesn't have the instincts, he'll never be a successful entrepreneur.

Sarah Sanders was widely mocked in January when she told the Christian Broadcasting Network that God "wanted Donald Trump to become president, and that's why he's there." But she was accurately reflecting her boss's self-image, albeit in religious rather than pseudobiological terms. Trump really does believe that the genetic inheritance of extraordinary instincts is what has made so him uniquely qualified to intuit the truth about any subject on earth. In October 2018 he told the Associated Press that he understood climate change because "my uncle was a great professor at MIT for many years. Dr. John Trump. And I didn't talk to him about this particular subject, but I have a natural instinct for science."

This belief in Trump's own version of predestination is the fundamental basis for his presidency. Sims writes that Trump "operated almost entirely off of gut instinct" and hence that "no one knew what he would say, not even the staff." He notes his "general lack of interest in the minutiae of…pretty much everything"—instinct does not require evidence. Peter Navarro, whom Trump brought into the White House in 2017 as his adviser on trade policy, told Bob Woodward that the president's intuition on trade is "always right" and that the job of the people around him is thus to "provide the underlying analytics that confirm his intuition." Sims uses a very similar phrase, writing of how Trump's chief courtiers "built the intellectual framework that turned Trump's raw, gut instincts into actual policy positions." He admits that he himself fed Trump newspaper articles "for one reason only: to tell him he had been right about something…. I'd print it out, write a little note on it that said, 'You were right about this.'" Instinct first, supporting evidence later.

This is as clear a statement as one could want of the nature of the administration, especially as Trump has reshaped it over time by ditching those who did not understand that their job, first and last, was to confirm the instincts of the infallible leader. They must practice a sycophancy that is not just political but biological. When his physician (and failed nominee as secretary for veterans' affairs) Ronny Jackson announced after Trump's physical examination in 2018 that "he has incredibly good genes, and it's just the way God made him," he was not merely

engaging in pseudomedical hyperbole. He was reciting the first article of faith in the Trump apostle's creed: Trump is genetically superior, and this superiority manifests itself in his intuitions.

It does not seem incidental that this is one of the reasons why religious conservatives are so comfortable serving Trump: sinner though he may be, he is a source of revealed truth. It is striking that in both Christie's and Sims's accounts, the emergence of the Access Hollywood tape of Trump boasting about sexually assaulting women is seen as the testing ground for true loyalty. Both men make much of their religious faith, Catholic in Christie's case, evangelical in Sims's, and of their happy marriages. Here, Trump's true "instincts" were fully audible—feral, misogynistic, and adulterous. Yet for both men there is a pride in having shown unwavering loyalty to the boss while others were deserting him.

Christie recounts the episode as a crisis in which he himself showed a cool head. There is no moral anxiety. Sims does wonder about the campaign surrogates who went on air to speak up for Trump: "How could people go on TV, night after night, and defend things they knew in their heart were indefensible?" Yet he then compares himself to the persecuted Christians of Egypt and likens his own loyalty to Trump to the agonizing compromises they have to make with their dictatorial president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Such moral evasions, he seems to acknowledge, were "the things I needed to tell myself in order to keep going on this campaign." They were also the things those who worked for Trump would keep telling themselves in the White House: that Trump's uniqueness places him above ordinary morality.

The gut is a tyrant. Intuition is both inherently unpredictable and, as a basis for public policy, inherently anti-democratic. It does not have to account for itself—any more than divine inspiration can be questioned by believers. It is not open to contradiction because it is entirely personal—the insight is unique to the president. Trump declared in his acceptance speech at the Republican convention in 2016, having evoked an apocalyptic vision of a broken America, "I alone can fix it." This "I" is all gut and no brain. Everything in government must flow from the instincts of the singular leader. Trump was being entirely consistent when he spoke of his admiration for the way North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un exerted authority: "He speaks and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same." If, as he later claimed, this was a joke, it was nonetheless a highly revelatory jest.

Donald Trump

Donald Trump; drawing by John Springs

It does not matter that Trump's oracular speech is hardly delphic. As Sims puts it, "Trump talked like other people breathed. It was like a form of exercise for him—an endless exertion of words, phrases, asides, and observations. Sometimes he'd start a sentence and figure out the point he wanted to make along the way." Yet this logorrhea is—for himself and his acolytes—the expression of infallible instincts. The spontaneous overflow of Trump's momentary emotions is the sole source of America's salvation. The job of his underlings is not—as Christie among others mistakenly thought—to hold them back or to organize them, but to channel them.

Confirmation bias in this administration is not an epistemological failing. It is the primary principle of governance: first, confirm Trump's biases.

Since he alone can access his infallible gut, and since instincts are immune to consistency, Trump's subordinates must accommodate themselves to his unpredictability. In a wartime broadcast for the BBC, George Orwell reflected on the totalitarianisms of the 1930s and 1940s. He noted that they differed from the controlling ideologies of the past precisely in their embrace of the idea that infallible truths can change with the leader's desires:

The orthodoxies of the past didn't change, or at least didn't change rapidly. In mediaeval Europe the Church dictated what you could believe, but at least it allowed you to retain the same beliefs from birth to death. It didn't tell you to believe one thing on Monday and another on Tuesday…. In a sense, [the believer's] thoughts are circumscribed, but he passes his whole life within the same framework of thought. His emotions aren't tampered with. Now, with totalitarianism exactly the opposite is true. The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it doesn't fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas…because it needs absolute obedience from its subjects, but it can't avoid the changes, which are dictated by the needs of power politics. It declares itself infallible, and at the same time it attacks the very concept of objective truth.3

This is very Trumpian. He replaces objective truth with subjective truth but insists that his followers recognize it nonetheless as objectively infallible. While his core political program has now reduced itself to a single item—build that wall—everything else can change. The admiring Sims writes that Trump has "strong opinions, weakly held." And this opens the way to the most pleasing performance of power. One great mark of power is that, to your followers, you are equally infallible when you proclaim opposite truths. Thus, "Lyin' Ted" Cruz had his sins washed clean in October 2018 when Trump rebaptized him "Beautiful Ted." (The new nickname has not stuck.) Or, in a matter of rather more moment, Kim Jong-un can be transformed from the Little Rocket Man on whom Trump would unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen" to "Chairman Kim" with whom, in his own words, he "fell in love." The Trump who threatened apocalyptic war on the Korean peninsula becomes the heroic peacemaker of the 2019 State of the Union address who singlehandedly saved Korea from the terrible war he himself had portended. The gut instincts that told him to rattle his saber then told him to scatter rose petals at Kim's feet.

And the pleasure in this is that his followers, like Communists of old desperately tacking to the shifting winds of the Moscow line, must agree that Trump's opposites are equally right. If and when Trump decides that the Chinese are not, as he called them at a rally in 2011, "motherfuckers" but the greatest allies the US has ever had, that is what they will be.

In international relations, predictability is founded on the principle that treaty obligations assumed under one regime will not be discarded by its successor. Trump has overturned this principle by withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from the Paris climate accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, UNESCO, the multilateral nuclear accord with Iran, NAFTA, the

Universal Postal Agreement, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Korean–United States Free Trade Agreement, and the World Trade Organization. All international treaties are, to Trump, the equivalents of Christie's doomed transition plan, threats to his monopoly on unpredictability. Sims records a conversation in the Oval Office in which the president boasted to him of having made the US even more unpredictable than North Korea: "Now they don't know what to make of me…. They don't have any idea. No one does. And that's a good thing. That's how it should be."

The problem for Trump's enablers is not just that his intuitions are innately unpredictable and that this reduces the governing process, in Sims's description, to holding "the thin line between controlled chaos and total anarchy." It is that Trump's real political instincts are not for governing but for campaigning. In this, he is surely the first president for whom the office itself is a let-down, the rather dreary destination after a thrilling journey. As Sims astutely notes, "nothing about being President has ever reached the high of becoming President." But the one high he can still reach is the buzz of one-way loyalty.

In The Art of the Deal, Trump makes it clear that by far the highest human value is personal loyalty. Beyond his own family, the one individual for whom he seems to feel something like love is his mentor, the notorious Roy Cohn. He acknowledges that, as his lawyer, Cohn could be brilliant but "could also be a disaster." He even admits, in essence, that Cohn was a crook who "once told me that he'd spent more than two thirds of his adult life under indictment on one charge or another." But none of this matters because of Cohn's unshakable loyalty to Trump:

Just compare that with all the hundreds of "respectable" guys who make careers out of boasting about their uncompromising integrity but have absolutely no loyalty. They think only about what's best for them and don't think twice about stabbing a friend in the back if the friend becomes a problem. What I liked most about Roy Cohn was that he would do just the opposite. Roy was the sort of guy who'd be there at your hospital bed, long after everyone else had bailed out, literally standing by you to the death.

Loyalty is, of course, the lowest of the virtues. It is honor among thieves, the operating code of every mafia. Trump evoked it in precisely these terms on December 16 when, after Michael Cohen, Cohn's rather anemic descendant as consigliere, cut a deal with prosecutors, he tweeted that "Michael Cohen…became a 'Rat.'" In this at least we might see a consistency with the ideals set out in The Art of the Deal: uncompromising integrity ranks way below "literally standing by you to the death." Cohen, like all the other potential rats trapped by Robert Mueller's terriers, should honor the code of loyalty, take the rap, and keep his mouth shut. But there is a twist. Loyalty is supposed to go both ways. As so many of his enablers have discovered, Trump demands it but does not return it.

The point of loyalty is mutual predictability. It is an assurance of how another person will behave toward you, even in difficult circumstances. And this is where Trump's cultivation of unpredictability finally works against him. When you are predictably unpredictable, you are also

predictably disloyal. Christie and Sims are both utterly medieval in their complaints about how they were betrayed. Their books are like cahiers de doléances from the ancien régime, in which it was permissible to report one's sufferings so long as they were blamed on the royal advisers, but never, ever on the monarch. Christie was done in by Jared Kushner, whose father Christie had put in jail when he was US attorney for New Jersey, but Donald, he believes, still loves him. Sims was undone by the jealousies of people around the former chief of staff John Kelly, but he still loves his master. Yet Sims, who has infinitely more insight than Christie, does realize, when he is eventually shafted, that his beloved Trump "hadn't lifted a finger for countless loyal aides before me, and I'm sure he wouldn't for countless loyal aides to come." One would hope that reading these books would transform any loyal aide into a rat. The consequences might be more unpredictable than even Trump could handle.

1
See my "Saboteur in Chief," The New York Review, December 6, 2018. ↩

2
Reflections on the Human Condition (Hopewell, 2006), p. 64. ↩

3
The Complete Works of George Orwell (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), Vol. 12, p. 504. ↩

The Uncivil War Over Schools
Jonathan Zimmerman MARCH 21, 2019 ISSUE
Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side
by Eve L. Ewing
University of Chicago Press, 222 pp., $22.50
A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago Since the 1960s
by Elizabeth Todd-Breland
University of North Carolina Press, 328 pp., $24.95 (paper)
How Schools Work: An Inside Account of Failure and Success from One of the Nation's Longest-Serving Secretaries of Education
by Arne Duncan
Simon and Schuster, 243 pp., $26.99
'63 Boycott
a documentary film directed by Gordon Quinn

Bill Healy/Kartemquin Films
Protesters against public school closings, Chicago, 2013; from the film '63 Boycott
In 2012 Chicago public school teachers went on strike. They aimed not just to improve their wages and hours but to stalemate the reform agenda of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who wanted to replace underperforming neighborhood schools with charter schools, lengthen the school day, and tie teacher salaries to students' scores on standardized tests. Even for Chicago, a city

noted for bare-knuckle politics, it was a bruising battle. At a City Hall meeting the previous year with Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis, who brusquely rebuffed his plea for the longer school day, the famously foulmouthed mayor had replied with a tart rebuke of his own: "Fuck you, Lewis."

In the buildup to the strike, Lewis branded Emanuel—a former chief of staff for President Barack Obama—"a liar and a bully." She also denounced Arne Duncan, who had served as school superintendent in Chicago before Obama appointed him as secretary of education in 2009. In one especially sour moment, Lewis even mocked Duncan's apparent lisp. "This guy who has the nerve to stand up and say, 'Education is the thivil rights ithue of our time.'" Lewis said. "You know he went to private school because if he had gone to public school he'd have had that lisp fixed."1

There's an astonishing lack of civility in the war over our schools, which are supposed to teach young people how to debate their differences in a civil manner. And in urban America, it's mainly a civil war among Democrats. Chicago is a one-party town, like most big cities, but it's riven by bitter divisions over charter schools, merit pay, and other hallmarks of contemporary education reform. Obama stood on the sidelines during the strike, remaining neutral even though he had supported charters and merit pay since his days as a community organizer in the city. Meanwhile, the teachers who mercilessly lambasted Emanuel and Duncan mostly gave Obama a free pass.

That's because of race, which runs through our educational civil war like a bloody river. Obama's color surely insulated him from charges of racism, which the sociologist Eve L. Ewing, author of Ghosts in the Schoolyard, sees as the driving force behind a spate of recent school closings in Chicago. It also protects him from attacks like those from the historian Elizabeth Todd-Breland, who in A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago Since the 1960s unfavorably compares "neoliberal" reformers with community-based black activists seeking self-determination through education. At the start of her book, Todd-Breland notes that the heavily black, brown, and female makeup of a pro-union protest during the 2012 teachers' strike made it look like a rally for Obama's presidential reelection campaign of the same year. But Obama and the teachers were often at loggerheads, which is an inconvenient fact that both Ewing and Todd-Breland overlook.

Nor is Obama mentioned in the new documentary film '63 Boycott, which features powerful original footage of a city-wide African-American student walkout on October 22, 1963, to protest segregated and overcrowded schools. The film includes contemporary interviews with participants in the strike, many of whom state the belief that the recent closing of predominantly black schools in Chicago reflects the same racism that created segregation in the first place. Likewise, they decry charter schools for undermining urban education and its largely African-American constituency. You'd never know from the film that charters have been championed by Obama, whose framed portrait appears briefly—and incongruously—during an

interview in the home of a black Chicago civil rights veteran, even as he is denouncing Obama's favored educational policies as racist.

If black children kept out of their shuttered schools are the "ghosts in the schoolyard," to quote Ewing's evocative title, Barack Obama is the Ghost of School Reform: we know he's there, but he's usually out of sight. Why would black parents protest the closing of their schools, Ewing asks, if these schools were truly failing? It's a good question, and we can just as easily turn it around: If the effort to reform schools (including the closing of poorly performing ones) is bad for African-Americans, why have many African-American leaders endorsed it?

Supporters of reform include not just Obama but New Jersey senator Cory Booker, who recently announced his candidacy for the presidency in 2020. When he was mayor of Newark, Booker partnered with Mark Zuckerberg and other philanthropists to sharply expand charter schools in the city. He became a hero in reform circles but a villain to teachers' unions, which see charters as a drain on neighborhood public schools and an attack on the labor movement (most charter schools are not unionized).

Booker tweeted out his support in January for striking teachers in Los Angeles, endorsing their demands for higher pay and lower class sizes. But he was silent about the union's call for a moratorium on charter schools, which remain the major (if not always acknowledged) battlefield in the Democrats' civil war over education. In the mayoral election after Booker departed for the Senate, Newark's majority-black voters chose the vocal charter critic Ras Baraka over Shavar Jeffries, who now directs a staunchly pro-charter group called Democrats for Education Reform. Both sides in this dispute want more resources for public schools, but they differ strongly in their views of how the resources should be distributed and how the schools should be run.

In his autobiography Dreams from My Father (1995), Barack Obama recalled the dismal state of Chicago public schools in the 1980s, when he lived and worked in the city: crumbling buildings, low graduation rates, and bloated bureaucracies. But Obama found that the biggest problems were the teachers and principals, who defended the status quo by making excuses. The students were lazy and unruly, educators said, and their parents didn't care. By contrast, Obama saw communities that were desperate for education and anguish about schools that could not, or would not, deliver it to them. This experience converted Obama into a believer in charter schools—which would, theoretically, allow parents to bypass their inadequate neighborhood schools—and also in merit pay for teachers whose students showed measurable academic gains.

Both elements became part of his 2009 "Race to the Top" initiative, which allowed states to compete for federal grants based on their embrace of his preferred educational reforms. States were rewarded for instituting merit pay and for removing limits on the number of charters they allowed, and also for establishing "college- and career-ready" standards. For all practical purposes, that meant adopting the "Common Core" guidelines, which aimed to establish a shared set of academic expectations across American schools.

It also meant that more schools would be deemed "failing"—and would eventually be closed—if they proved unable to raise student test scores. Serving some of America's poorest children, urban schools were at the greatest risk of being shuttered. Sometimes a closed school was reconstituted as a different public school in the same building; sometimes it was replaced by a nearby charter school, privately operated but funded by public dollars; sometimes there was nothing at all in its stead, requiring parents to find schools outside their neighborhoods as well as transportation to get their children there. Echoing Obama, some Democrats insisted that reformers stay the course. Without high-stakes tests of student achievement, they asked, how can schools be held accountable?

But others hoped for a new kind of calculus that would acknowledge what underserved communities actually wanted: a traditional neighborhood public school, with sufficient resources to fund playgrounds, librarians, and the other features that are standard in more affluent areas. Schools that radically underperform by every numerical measure often remain popular with parents, Ewing reminds us in Ghosts in the Schoolyard, because "a school's value is about much more than numbers." In the US, schools have always been the most important public institution in community life. So if you tell a group of citizens that their school has failed, you're also telling them that they have failed, and that they don't deserve assistance of any kind.

That accounts for the bad blood in cities like Chicago, where Emanuel closed nearly fifty schools just a year after the teachers' strike. Ewing points out that of the students affected by the closures, 88 percent were black; meanwhile, 71 percent of the shuttered schools had a majority-black faculty. None of this was lost on African-American students, teachers, or parents, who condemned the closing of their schools as an overtly bigoted act. "I feel like this is so racist of y'all to close down all these CPS schools," a middle school student told a public hearing. "It's taking away education from them when you closing their schools down and you movin' them into new schools and you takin' them out of they comfort zone and you takin' jobs from teachers."

Other students said that "the schools were closed because we're black and we were failing all our tests," as their teacher told Ewing; in the era of high-stakes testing, Chicago's children obviously know about their low academic performance and its consequences for their schools. But to most of the people whom Ewing quotes, this isn't really a question of academics at all. In the book's most chilling remark, a former principal likens school closings to slave auctions. "I'm, like, begging you to keep my family together," she told a hearing, between sobs. "Don't take them and separate them."

Ewing discounts the "quantitative reality" put forth by Emanuel and other reformers. She instead endorses community critics who pointed to "another reality" to explain why their schools were closed: racism. But she isn't shy about invoking her own quantitative statistics in the case against school closings: for example, she notes that test scores plummeted in schools after

districts announced plans to close them, and that students' scores didn't rise when they relocated afterward.

Ewing is deeply attuned to differences across races in Chicago, but she's much less concerned with differences within them, and she doesn't seriously examine diverse perceptions about schools within the black community. For example, national surveys reveal strong support among African-Americans for charter schools. But Ewing presents blacks in South Chicago as heavily opposed to charters, which suggests a bias in her sample of informants. She also tends to take her subjects' observations about racism at face value. Everyone who perceives racism is assumed to be a victim of it, no matter what other forces are in play. And everyone charged with racism is viewed as a perpetrator of it. Leaders atop the Chicago school system "don't care about African American communities," parents tell Ewing. "They don't care if we get an education."

Did Chicago school officials—including African-American ones—really regard black communities with such disdain? Ewing says that's the wrong question, because racism isn't a matter of belief at all. It's a system of power, designed to maintain the oppression and subjugation of black people. She compares it to a merry-go-round, which determines the position of each horse no matter who rides it. It's a strangely robotic and bloodless metaphor, especially for a book that pays such careful attention to individual experiences. Drawing upon community hearings and extensive personal interviews, Ewing repeatedly demonstrates how her subjects perceived school closings as racist; but at the same time, she insists that racism isn't a question of perception but rather of unequal outcomes: school closings disproportionately affect black students and inhibit their learning. So, if another scholar were to show that students' test scores rose after their schools closed, would Ewing temper her claim about the racism of the policy?

I doubt it. Despite her insistence that racism isn't a question of belief, her argument that the school closings were racist ultimately rests on the beliefs of African-Americans on the South Side of Chicago. The people she interviews think that the school closings were racist, and we should listen closely to them. But we condescend to them when we place their beliefs beyond critique, as if the victims of Chicago's wrongful educational history can never be wrong themselves.

In A Political Education, Elizabeth Todd-Breland recounts that educational history in vivid detail, starting with the 1963 school boycott. African-American students and teachers staged several more citywide boycotts after that, focused especially on overcrowding in all-black schools. Rather than allowing black children to attend whites-only schools, which were much less cramped, school superintendent Benjamin Willis relocated thousands of African-Americans to portable classroom trailers. These "Willis Wagons" became a symbol of racial inequality in Chicago and a spur for black demands for school integration, which African-Americans said would relieve overcrowding and give their children access to the better educational resources

that whites commanded. But resistance in white neighborhoods—and, eventually, white flight to the suburbs—killed that dream a few short years after it began.

Dawoud Bey
Dawoud Bey: Theresa, South Shore High School, Chicago, IL, 2003; from Bey's 'Class Pictures' series. The photograph appears in his new book, Seeing Deeply, published by University of Texas Press.
Then came school reform, which Todd-Breland casts as a product less of racism than of neoliberalism. This term has become something of a cliché in progressive political circles, signifying everything from free-market capitalism to government austerity.2 In Todd-Breland's book, it connotes "policies premised on market-based principles of competition, privatization, charter school expansion, and a reliance on standardized testing." To her credit, she acknowledges that the neoliberal project drew bipartisan as well as multiracial support: in Obama's first year in the White House, for example, his administration engaged the strange bedfellows Al Sharpton and Newt Gingrich to campaign together on behalf of his Race to the Top initiative.

But in Todd-Breland's telling, the neoliberal reform tradition has always stood in tension with what she calls "Black self-determination." As the integrationist dream stumbled in the late 1960s, African-Americans in Chicago sought to develop their own educational institutions. Some created private schools, often with Pan-African themes; others worked with neighborhood organizations to develop public schools under "community control," which aimed to wrest power from the mostly white bureaucrats who sat atop the city school system. Buoyed by creative leaders and strong parent networks, some of the schools flourished; others wilted and died.

Still others reorganized themselves as charter schools in the 1990s, which raises a challenge for Todd-Breland's interpretation: How could a school with roots in the black tradition of self-determination that she admires embrace the neoliberal reform that she rejects? Part of the answer lay in the resources that taxpayer-supported charters promised; if charters were "the game in town," one cash-strapped black school leader reasoned, "then we need to get a piece of the action." But the price has been a dilution of black self-determination, Todd-Breland argues, which has been "co-opted" by neoliberalism and "repurposed" in the language of individual achievement rather than collective racial uplift. She concludes her book with a ringing call to rediscover the older radical spirit, which can reconnect African-Americans to their communities and reshape their schools around black pride and purpose.

Todd-Breland finds the radical spirit alive and well in the 2012 teachers' strike as well as in the 2013 protests against Emanuel's school closings. She also sees traces of it in the national Movement for Black Lives, which demanded a moratorium on charter schools in 2016. But Todd-Breland fails to note that the same demand led to the defection of several prominent Black Lives leaders, who believed that charters could empower black parents and communities. "I think it's our job as education reformers, as people who are fighting for educational justice, to

engage the community, to engage our parents and to make sure they have the best information," declared Rashad Anthony Turner, who stepped down from his Black Lives leadership position in Minnesota after the organization's charter moratorium. "Because I don't believe that any parent on the face of this Earth would say that they shouldn't be in control, or be able to choose, where their child goes to school." The alternative, he said, was to make students "continue to suffer" in their current neighborhood schools, where "you might be one of the 70 percent of kids who can't read at the end of third grade."3

Despite their insistence on the importance of listening to black voices, Ewing and Todd-Breland don't pay much attention to voices like Rashad Turner's. For pro-charter views you need to consult Arne Duncan's recent memoir, How Schools Work, which traces his rise from Chicago's South Side to being the head of the city's public school system and ultimately secretary of education in the Obama administration, from 2009 to 2015. Duncan—a cheerful and unrepentant champion of school reform—grew up just a few blocks from some of the closed schools described by Ewing. As he readily admits, he came from a much more privileged background than most of Ewing's subjects: his father taught at the University of Chicago, where Duncan attended the university's elite (and mostly white) Laboratory School. But he routinely interacted with African-Americans, either by playing basketball on local courts (Duncan eventually played pro ball in Australia) or by tutoring at a South Side children's center run by his mother, where Duncan learned about the low-quality education provided by many of the city's public schools.

When Duncan took over as schools chief in Chicago in 2001, just half of entering ninth-graders in the city graduated high school; only a quarter of those graduates were ready for college; and only half of those ready for college would complete it. So of one hundred high school freshmen, six were likely to graduate from college; among black and Latino freshmen, only three would do so. Nationwide, the news was similarly dismal: half of black and Latino students graduated from high school, and between a half and a third of those graduates were ready for college.

As Duncan proudly notes, his efforts to reward successful schools—and to close lower-performing ones—led to higher graduation rates and remarkable test-score gains: by 2018, Chicago schoolchildren between third and eighth grade were improving at a faster rate than students in 96 percent of American schools. Yet nearly three fourths of eighth graders in the city still aren't proficient in math and reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress: despite their accelerated rates of improvement, many children start so far behind that they can't catch up. Meanwhile, Duncan never mentions the large body of research suggesting that test-based incentives don't enhance student learning in the long run. Most prominently, a rigorous 2011 study by the National Academy of Sciences—examining nationwide data over nine years—found little consistent effect of standardized testing upon academic achievement.

You'd think that a guy who is so wedded to data—a recurring theme in Duncan's book—would at least mention this study. But in the battle over school reform, every side invokes research that

buttresses its viewpoint and downplays research that doesn't. Near the end of her own book, Todd-Breland states flatly that charter school students "have not consistently performed overwhelmingly better than students in traditional public schools." But a 2015 Stanford study found that black students in charter schools gained the test-score equivalent of thirty-six extra days of math learning and twenty-six extra days of reading per year, compared to peers of similar background in regular public schools. That's hardly the last word on a subject that continues to generate new research and debate. But it's disingenuous for Todd-Breland, Duncan, or Ewing to pretend that the research speaks with a single voice, when they know full well that it does not.

We live in a cynical age. And it's the height of cynicism to imagine that your side is defending "the kids" while the other side is deliberately neglecting them. The basic faith of liberal democracy is that equally informed people can reason from the same set of facts to different conclusions. But in the uncivil war over schools—which, it's worth restating, are supposed to teach future citizens that liberal faith—we seem to have abandoned it. If you want to test minority students and hold their schools accountable, you risk being called a racist who seeks to keep them mired in oppression; if you oppose such measures and want to keep your neighborhood school open, you may be denounced as a union shill who puts adult interests ahead of the kids. But how will our children learn to deliberate their differences in a civil manner if the adults in the room can't, or won't? The problem here isn't neoliberalism; it's illiberalism, which imagines every political opponent as a mortal threat to the nation. And it permeates the entire debate over our schools, belying their democratic premise and purpose.

Nor is it clear whether victory for either side would make a substantial difference in the lives of America's poorest children, who need much more assistance than our political system is willing to give them. In the recent Los Angeles school strike, for example, teachers won an immediate seven-student reduction in high school math and English classes beginning next year. But in a city where some classes have as many as forty-six students, it's unlikely that reducing class size by a few students will improve learning. In a landmark study in Tennessee in the 1980s, researchers demonstrated that students in classes of between thirteen and seventeen children scored significantly better on standardized tests—and were more likely to go to college—than students in classes of twenty-two to twenty-six. Many Los Angeles classes are already much bigger than that, of course, and bringing them down to a level that actually enhances learning would require a huge—and, at present, unimaginable—redistribution of resources. In that light, debates over charter schools and merit pay sound a bit like moving chairs around on the deck of the Titanic. Until we're willing to make large and sustained public investments in poor urban communities, most of their public schools will continue to languish.

When Barack Obama appointed Arne Duncan education secretary, he instructed him to move ahead aggressively on merit pay, charter schools, and Common Core. But he also cautioned against alienating his opponents, especially those in his own party. "Just don't poke the unions in the eye with this," Obama warned. "Let's engage, not attack." He might have been wrong

about school reform, as Eve Ewing and Elizabeth Todd-Breland suggest, but he was right about democracy. We could do worse than to listen to him, especially right now.

1
Jason Zengerle, “Rahm Emanuel’s Top Nemesis Just Might Take Him On,” The New Republic, July 14, 2014; Ben Goldberger, “Karen Lewis, Street Fighter,” Chicago Magazine, October 2, 2012. ↩

2
See Daniel Rodgers, “The Uses and Abuses of ‘Neoliberalism,’” Dissent, Winter 2018. ↩

3
Beth Hawkins, “In-Depth: Black Lives Matter’s Rashad Turner on Why He’s Quitting Over Charter School Attacks,” The 74, September 18, 2016. ↩

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