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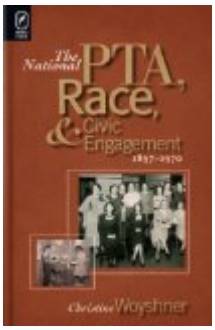

Christine A. Woyshner. *The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897-1970.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009. x + 277 pp. $52.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-0755-0.

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Brown v. Board of Education (1954) is one of the most celebrated decisions in the American legal canon. Progress narratives cast the Supreme Court's decision to strike down formal segregation in schools, overruling its "separate but equal" holding in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), as an unqualified victory for racial equality and access to education. As constitutional law scholar Jack Balkin observes in *What Brown v. Board of Education Should Have Said*, "the idea of *Brown* remains largely sacred in American political culture."[1]

This fetishization of the *idea* of *Brown* has hidden from view some of its darker sociological realities. The focus on *Brown* as a turning point, as a discrete moment, has elided the tortuously drawn-out process that was desegregation. The Supreme Court, in its follow-up decision known as *Brown II*, rejected the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) argument for immediate desegregation and instead ordered that desegregation occur "with all deliberate speed."[2] Supporters of segregation seized on this vague standard as an opening for strong resistance, stalling formal desegregation for years, even decades.[3]

When desegregation did occur, it fundamentally altered and in many cases abolished "an anchor of the southern black community"--the black school [4]. Southern white administrators actively displaced black educational leaders, particularly principals.[5] The NAACP decision to attack segregation, rather than stay the course of equalized school and teacher funding, had costs. And black educators were among the groups that bore these most.[6]

Christine Woyshner's *The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897-1970* is part of a growing literature that places the well-known gains of *Brown* in context with these lesser-examined losses.[7] Woyshner's history of the National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) is the first comprehensive study of the role of race in one of the largest volunteer organizations of the twentieth century. Woyshner's careful account of the top-down origins of the white PTA and the bottom-up

emergence of the black PTA will interest lawyers, historians, sociologists, and educational scholars. The PTA is an important site for historical study because of its influential role in curricular reform and school funding. More generally, it represented a microcosm of the larger national battles around race and education. The federated structure of the PTA--modeled after the United States government--allowed state PTA segregation to persist even after the national PTA adopted formal integration. This is a story of political advocacy, racial uplift and suppression, and an ongoing national preoccupation with race and the child.

Woyshner's monograph is the culmination of extensive archival research. She has surveyed myriad primary documents from the white PTA, including minutes of meetings, photographs, state histories, periodicals, and members' private papers. One of the challenges Woyshner faced in her work on race was a dearth of original documents from the black PTA. In contrast to the white PTA, few original collections on the black PTA remain. Woyshner relies heavily on two organizational histories of the black PTA and the Georgia Colored Congress, as well as back issues of the respective groups' newspapers. The paucity of records on the black PTA is symptomatic of the broader eclipse of black leadership when the PTA desegregated. As Woyshner notes, "when Southern state and local PTA units integrated, the many documents of the black association were not kept despite one of the provisions of the unification agreement" being that these documents would be given an "honored place" (p. 198). In a cruel irony, the historical record of black advocacy was submerged at the very moment that integration was achieved.

Woyshner begins her study with the origins of the white PTA. This part of the historical discussion is labyrinthine because so many associations preceded what became the "Parent-Teachers Association." Initially founded as the National Congress of Mothers (NCM) during the height of the late nineteenth-century women's club movement, the PTA provided an early opportunity for women "to enact their political lives before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment" (p. 5). The NCM was founded as a top-down, nationally centralized organization that drew support from existing networks of women's clubs. The federated-network structure mediated conflict between local difference and national consistency in PTA work. Woyshner makes a plausible case to resist monolithic descriptions of the racial, gender, and class ideology of the early PTA. She notes that many participants in the early PTA were committed to evolving notions of child welfare and to displays of "unity across class, religion, and even race" (p. 20). The instruction that "no hats be worn" to the first annual meeting of the NCM, for example, was intended to signal interclass unity. And, yet, the fact that it was "white, upper-class society matrons leading the charge" (p. 20) revealed a disparity between the semiotics of class unity and the material reality of upper-class leadership.

Woyshner suggests that displays of unity would soon be tempered by growing anxieties over race and education. What had begun as a formally nondiscriminatory organization in 1897 would by 1920 bar black associations from its membership. Thus, even as the PTA gained in membership following World War I, it became structurally divided by a color line marking "race and difference" (p. 195).

Woyshner continues this story with the rise of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (the black PTA). In contrast to the top-down formation of the white PTA, the black PTA emerged in 1926 from grassroots organizing among African American parents and teachers in the South. "The ground-up development of the black PTA allowed for a gradual building of an institutional infrastructure that relied on the strength and leadership of existing African American organization" (p. 84). This project built on earlier waves of African American education and literacy advocacy. Here, Woyshner's work contrib-

utes to a growing literature on the history of African American education.[8]

Woyshner argues that "in the history of the PTA, common, everyday acts had a power and force of their own that have been overlooked" (p. 7). In other words, the groups' quotidian acts of civic engagement had a politics. The fundraising work of the white and black PTA groups had important material and ideological stakes. As Woyshner stresses, fundraising was "imbued with gender and racial dynamics" (p. 109). White PTA women raised considerable funds through the post-WWI era and in doing so gained influence over male school administrators. Fundraising in turn became implicated in struggles between PTA volunteers and professional educators over who would drive curricular reform and wield administrative power. For white male school administrators, PTA fundraising became a "double-edged sword" (p. 89).

African American organizers and educators could ill afford such tussles over effective control. Material deprivation, the result of vastly unequal funding for African American schools and teachers, was the overriding concern of the black PTA. As Woyshner recounts, "in segregated schools, fundraising took on a greater sense of urgency because it was a necessity; without it there would be no schools and no books and materials" (p. 89). Whereas white parent-teacher associations were holding bake sales for non-essential materials by the 1920s, black associations continued to focus on essential supplies and racial uplift.

The necessity of black fundraising was dismissed by many white PTA leaders who objected to fundraising overwhelming other elements of the PTA mandate. Some PTA leaders were critical of black fundraising activities because they believed it "would lead to gambling or other immoral acts" (p. 116). Marguerite Taylor, a white state-level official in Missouri, cautioned that fundraising activities should be kept "in proper relationship to the real purpose for which the organization is structured--the welfare of children" (p. 117). By casting child welfare and fundraising in oppositional terms, Taylor purveyed a view of child welfare work as affective and nonmaterial. The archetype was the innocent (white) child in need of moral protection. Material deprivation (black) was read out by this affective frame.

Material deprivation and racial inequality in education were also read out through internationalist projects. In the 1920s and 1930s, as the white PTA began to emphasize the need for intercultural tolerance, it was able to circumvent its own segregationist policies by emphasizing "international understanding over domestic race relations" (p. 140). The "anarchy of empire" at home, to borrow W. E. B. Du Bois's words, was managed through a beneficent focus on the international.[9]

By the end of World War II, however, these "tensions of empire" were becoming increasingly untenable.[10] With the drafting of the United Nations Charter, "the PTA seized the opportunity to promote the idea of the care and protection of children worldwide" (p. 140). Woyshner argues that this engagement with the UN, an organization in which many people were committed to minority rights and cultural tolerance, increasingly forced PTA leaders to address their own segregationist policies. New possibilities were created by institutional shift. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the organization's magazine, ***National Parent-Teacher***, featured several articles questioning whether democracies should permit prejudice in any form. The black PTA likewise drew on ideas of world citizenship to promote racial equality. Intercultural education in particular "became the vehicle that would help the black PTA address such issues" (p. 144).

In her final full chapter, "Diminishing as It Advanced," Woyshner examines the impact of ***Brown v. Board of Education*** on the PTA. The chapter title is drawn from a 1961 organizational history written by a member of the black PTA. That history ends with the lament: "So the Nation-

al Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers marches on, diminishing as it advances" (quoted, p. 14). Written a full decade before the last two state PTA units would integrate, the statement captured the dilemma of desegregation for African American organizers. While almost all black PTA members shared the aim of integrated learning, they understood that desegregation would spell real losses for African American students and organizers. White segregationists would violently resist black student presence in desegregated schools. Black teachers, administrators, and organizers would be excluded in sweeping numbers, depriving black students of formal black mentorship and educational guidance. To advocate for integration was to act ***in spite*** of these costs.

The final desegregation of all state PTA units in 1971, a full seventeen years after ***Brown***, began the "quiet dissolution" of a once flourishing national organization (p. 192). White resistance in most integrated units and at the national level quashed black leadership opportunities. True unification in leadership never became a reality. More generally, the organization that had given voice to the political work of so many women began to lose its reach. Its voice was "drowned out" amidst the near revolutionary upheaval of busing conflicts, "racial angst, and the economic and political woes of the war in Vietnam" (p. 192). As more women entered the workforce and nonaffiliated parent-teacher organizations spread, the PTA lost its influence over legislation, child welfare, and education. Social and political processes of racial and gender reform intersected in the post-***Brown*** moment to enervate a formerly vibrant site of civic engagement.

Woyshner has excavated a key strand in the history of American civil society engagement in public education. This is a history of teachers and parents. Whereas desegregation is often narrated through the lens of institutions--the Supreme Court, district courts, school districts, and law enforcement--Woyshner reveals the centrality of parents in the political struggle for and against desegregation. White PTA members who resisted desegregation did so as parents who had a vested interest in transmitting a racial and/or class supremacist ideology to their children. As we face a public school system that is as racially segregated today as it was in 1954, the politics of parents, in relation to their own and other children, warrant the degree of scrutiny Woyshner has paid them here.

Notes

[1]. Jack Balkin, ***What Brown v. Board of Education Should Have Said*** (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4.

[2]. ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka***, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

[3]. Michael J. Klarman, ***From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 318-320.

[4]. Adam Fairclough, "The Costs of ***Brown***: Black Teachers and School Integration," ***Journal of American History*** 91 (2004): 43-55, 47.

[5]. Fairclough, "The Costs of ***Brown***," 53; Charles C. Bolton, "The Last Stand of Massive Resistance: Mississippi Public School Integration, 1970," ***Journal of Mississippi History*** 61 (1999): 347-49.

[6]. Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, ***America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*** (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 103-104 (discussing resistance by some black teachers and principals in the mid-1950s to the NACCP strategy to overturn "separate-but-equal," in part, because of concerns about the future impact on black educators).

[7]. See also Klarman, ***From Jim Crow***; Foster, ***Black Teachers***; Cecelski, ***Along Freedom Road***; Michael Klarman, "How ***Brown*** Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," ***Journal of American History*** 81 (1994): 81-118; Lani Guinier, "From

Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: ***Brown v. Board of Education*** and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," ***Journal of American History*** 91 (2004): 92-118; Gerald Rosenberg, ***The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring About Social Change?*** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,), 70-71; Risa Goluboff, ***The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Louis Michael Seidman, "***Brown*** and ***Miranda***," ***California Law Review*** 80 (1992): 673-753; and Girardeau A. Spann, ***Race against the Court: The Supreme Court and Minorities in Contemporary America*** (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

[8]. Heather Andrea Williams, ***Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); James D. Anderson, ***The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); William Preston Vaughn, ***Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877*** (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974); Adam Fairclough, ***Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow*** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and Michele Foster, ***Black Teachers on Teaching*** (New York: The New Press, 1997).

[9]. W. E. B. DuBois, ***Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 276. See also Amy Kaplan, ***The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[10]. I draw this phrase from Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, ***Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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