Power, Protest and the Public Schools

Melissa F. Weiner (2010). *Power, Protest and the Public Schools. Jewish and African American Struggles in New York City*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Review by Alan Singer

My father Mendel was born on the Lower East Side of New York City in 1920. He eventually graduated from Straubenmuller Textile High School in Chelsea in 1939. His brother Abie was born in 1918 and their older sister Kayla in 1916. Their father Zalman arrived in New York in 1909 from Galicia in Poland, now the Ukraine. Their mother Fayga followed him four year

Kayla would be called to the office because their parents would have nothing to do with

My father-in-law Ed Yanowitz's family migrated to the Lower East Side from Rumania a furrier, the fur workers union was communist, so Ed and his older brother were comm and young men. They also spoke English and Yiddish. Hebrew was something you mu

od as an historian. My

y school in the Bronx was involved in a one-way busing plan starting in the 1960s and a nber of Black children from Harlem were integrated into the school. In 1963-1964, Reverend alamison led a citywide campaign for the racial integration of New York City schools. It was the late sixties when the collapse of the civil rights movement and White flight to the suburbs ool integration virtually impossible that the major focus of school activists in the Black ty was on community control and what we would now call an Afro-centric curriculum.

y father and I remember things wrong, but I don't think so. Instead, I think *Power, Protest and c Schools, Jewish and African American Struggles in New York City* by Melissa Weiner is ork of imagination than of history. Central to Weiner's thesis is that the struggle of "Jewish n New York City in the 1920s and 1930s to have Hebrew taught in the public schools as a reparatory language and the struggle of Black parents in the 1950s to include more African history and culture in the curriculum were fundamentally similar and demonstrate the of grassroots movements to reshape powerful institutions. It is the story of the way she would

have liked things to have been, with parallel struggles fought by two disempowered groups in different eras, not the history of what actually took place.

Part of the problem may be that Weiner, an assistant professor at Quinnipiac University, is a sociologist rather than an historian or a specialist in educational issues. The book is an outgrowth of her doctoral dissertation in the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota. In it, she manages to mention every current academic cliché about whiteness, privilege, racialization, discourses, counternarratives, and feminist and critical methodologies, but her bibliography does not list one interview with a participant in either of the struggles. While Weiner's goal is to demonstrate similarities in the struggles fought by Blacks and Jews to improve public education in their communities, a more balanced study, and a more useful one, would have explored both similarities and differences.

Weiner acknowledges that the campaign to have Hebrew taught in public schools was led by upper class better established German Jews embarrassed by the city's Yiddish speaking population and did not involve the millions of new Eastern European immigrants (pp. 99-100). It was neither a grassroots nor a parent-based movement. She never discusses communists in either the Jewish or Black communities, despite the fact that in the 1930s the city councilman from Harlem was a Black communist elected by a coalition of left-wing Blacks and Jews. She ignores the major historical and demographic events of the periods so the struggles she presents lack historical context. New York City schools were not vehicles of advancement for Jews in the 1920s and 1930, after all there was a Great Depression. But with U.S. capitalism dominance of the post-World War II world, suburbanization, and the vast expansion of white-collar work, Jews were able to benefit from public education. Meanwhile, as both Ira Katznelson (in *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*) and Marvin Harris (in *America Now: The Anthropology of a Changing Culture*) have pointed out, Blacks were effectively barred from housing, jobs, and schools, until after the great wave that had benefited the Jews. I th