

The Morality and Political Antagonisms of Neoliberal Discourse: Campbell Brown and the Corporatization of Educational Justice

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Neoliberalism is routinely criticized for its moral indifference, especially concerning the social application of moral objectives. Yet it also presupposes a particular moral code, where acting on the assumption of individual autonomy becomes the basis of a shared moral-political praxis. Using a discourse theoretical approach, this article explores different articulations of morality in neoliberal discourse. We focus on the case of Campbell Brown, the former CNN anchor who reinvented herself from 2012 to 2016 as a prominent charter school advocate and antagonist of teachers unions. We examine the ideological significance of a campaigning strategy that coheres around an image of the moral superiority of corporatized schooling against an antithetical representation of the moral degeneracy of America's public schools system. In particular, we highlight how Brown attempts to incorporate the fragments of different progressive discourses into a neoliberalized vision of educational justice.

Keywords: neoliberalism, discourse, media, public education, charter schools, unions

Neoliberalism is routinely criticized for its moral indifference, especially concerning the social application of moral objectives. Davies (2014) suggests that “neoliberalism has sought to eliminate normative judgment from public life to the greatest possible extent” (p. 8) by subordinating ethical concerns to putatively objective market measures. Hay (2007) ties neoliberalism to discourses that disparage the notion of the common good, because of the axiomatic rational choice assumption that the pursuit of self-interest is the only meaningful diagnostic of human action. This neoliberal representation of morality was given its most infamous shorthand expression in Margaret Thatcher's dictum, “There is no such thing as society,” (“Margaret Thatcher,” 2013, para. 7): conveying a view of the collective also embodied in her antagonism towards trade unions. And Thatcher's stance had a clear antecedent in Frederick Hayek's description of *social* as a “weasel word” (Kimball, 2007), which animated his hostility to the concept of “social justice” (Hayek, 1960).

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Date submitted: 2017–01–11

¹ This work was supported by a research completion grant from Massey University.

However, on its own terms, neoliberalism also presupposes a particular moral code, where acting on the assumption of self-interest and self-autonomy generates a particular political economic vision of “human well-being” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). These commitments were articulated in the less well-cited fragments of Thatcher’s quote (“Margaret Thatcher,” 2013): “Families” become the lynchpin of shared belonging, people “must look after themselves first” before “government can do anything,” and our “duty to look after ourselves” is tied to our duty to “look after our neighbours” (para. 7). Foucault (2008) captured these moral imperatives in the concept of the entrepreneurial self: Individuals are compelled to seek out market opportunities that enable their prosperity as units of “human capital,” so as to ensure they—and their dependents—function as productive social agents and do not become a drain on scarce state resources. The moral virtues of entrepreneurship are consistently juxtaposed with condemnations of a degenerate “dependency culture” (Heelas & Morris, 1992), which subjects individuals to inflexible rule structures that hamper innovation and productivity. Davies (2014) suggests that neoliberalism’s official disavowal of normative values obscures a contrary governmental rationality, where “an implicitly moral agenda” textures political assessments “about how and what to value” (p. 8). Moral commitments are encoded in an individualistic conception of the social, incorporating both a prescriptive vision of how people should act, alongside a suspicion of collectivist moral objectives.

This article explores the political interplay of these two iterations of morality in neoliberal discourse, both the positive vision of a moral code anchored in tropes of individual responsibility and productivity and the antagonism toward a claim to collective morality that is constructed as repressive of entrepreneurial freedoms. Our empirical analysis focuses on Campbell Brown, the former CNN anchor who reinvented herself from 2012 to 2016 as one of America’s most prominent education reform advocates. Brown has campaigned vigorously against teachers unions through her leadership of three different organizations: the Parents’ Transparency Project, the Partnership for Educational Justice, and, most recently, an educational news site, *The 74*.² Brown has been a controversial figure, in part because of her high-profile media visibility. Her interventions in the *New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC, and elsewhere have attracted the ire of teachers, unions, and politicians for their simplistic, and sometimes salacious, representations of teachers. Critics have questioned the integrity of the simple moral story cultivated by her persona of the concerned parent because of how it obscures her links to philanthropic networks committed to educational privatization. And her organizations have been criticized for appropriating progressive motifs in the furtherance of a charter school agenda, including campaigning strategies that stress their commitment to helping children in poor and minority schools. Our empirical focus here is on Brown’s intervention into education debates. Yet the background context to our case study is crucial, since she articulates a neoliberal agenda that has political antecedents that go back to the Reagan era (Scott, 2012, 2013). Brown appeals to a bipartisan common-sense view of U.S. public education that is already embedded in mainstream media narratives, especially in the assumption of a “broken” public school system in need of the specific reforms advocated by her and others (Janice Peck, 2015).

² The relationship between Brown’s journalistic and advocacy identities suggests an interesting line of inquiry, especially as it relates to debates about the neoliberalization of journalism. This problematic is not explored purposefully here, but is the basis of a second article by the authors.

Our analysis examines three moments in Brown's articulation of a teaching campaigner identity, beginning with her 2012 appearance at a New York State education forum, where she highlighted unions' inadequate response to the problem of "sexual predators" in the classroom, and ending in a 2016 conflict with New York Mayor Bill de Blasio over the regulation of charter schools. Using a discourse theoretical approach, we focus on the antagonisms that have shaped Brown's rhetoric, particularly as they resonate with our argument about neoliberalism.

Before we examine Brown more closely, however, we need to say more about the relationship between morality and neoliberalism, including how it pertains to neoliberal critiques of teaching unions. We also need to briefly discuss our theoretical and methodological approach, especially as it informs our understanding of neoliberal discourse.

Neoliberalism and (Anti)Morality

Neoliberalism presupposes a particular moral code of how subjects should internalize market-centric imperatives. It is an ideologically heterogeneous code, made up of variegated discursive elements that—in the most general sense—recall the history of liberalism and the influence of Judeo-Christian theologies (see Phelps, 2016, on the latter). It intersects with a historical episteme that places the autonomous, rational self as both the maker of its own destiny and, most importantly, as individually responsible for that destiny (Rose, 1992), evoking everything from the Western cultural motif of 1960s liberation to right-wing critiques of welfare dependency. And in the U.S., neoliberal logics have been routinely articulated with conservative, neoconservative, and evangelical elements, not least when it comes to educational questions (Apple, 2006).

What distinguishes neoliberalism, at least when compared with the laissez-faire liberalism of the 19th century, is the recognition that a preferred social order needs to be politically constructed; it is not enough to assume that the desired subjectivity will emerge naturally (Foucault, 2008; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015). Contrary to broad-stroke definitions of neoliberalism that presuppose a simple ideological opposition between free market and state, neoliberalism summons a rethinking of classical liberal assumptions about the separation of state and market that recasts it as a state-enabled form of market rule. As Jamie Peck (2010) puts it, "in practice, neoliberals too are statist (just different kinds of statist)" (p. 277). In short, neoliberalism prescribes a particular vision of how states should act to enable implicitly moral forms of market evaluation.

However, neoliberal thought, which is itself a site of theoretical heterogeneity (Mirowski, 2013), is also marked by deep antagonisms to the claimed moral authority of statist, collectivist, and socialist alternatives. Consider the work of Hayek (1944, 1960), one of the most important neoliberal thinkers (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015; Jamie Peck, 2010). Hayek's argument for the market was explicitly framed as an argument against the encroachment of moral judgments into state decision making. His position was grounded in antipathy to progressive liberal and socialistic attempts to formulate a positive conception of freedom, which often took the rhetorical form of a generalized state phobia (Foucault, 2008). Hayek (1960) insisted that freedom can only be coherently grasped in negative terms, to refer solely to "the absence of a particular obstacle—coercion by other men [*sic*]" (p. 19). The problem with the concept of

positive freedom, he argued, is that it seeks to recast what should be properly understood as an attribute of individuals to “groups of men [*sic*] as a whole, thus potentially allowing the state and other institutions to act coercively in the name of some dubious notion of ‘collective liberty’” (p. 13). Rather than simply thematizing the amorality of positive freedom, Hayek emphasized its explicitly moral dimensions, where the state (in both its social democratic and communist form) legislates in the name of a collectivist moral purpose that infringes on the (primarily economic) freedom of individuals. The entwinement of politics and morality is accordingly regarded with suspicion, not necessarily because of the undesirability of the moral objective, but because it overrides what Hayek takes to be the proper locus of moral action—individuals exercising market-based choices in accordance with their own moral criteria.

Hayek’s (1960) vision of the state stressed the importance of the law as a site for politically constituting a market order, in explicit contrast to laissez-faire ideologies that “appeal to the principle of non-interference” (p. 221; see also p. 231). Establishing the market as the primary social institution necessitates the statutory embedding of universal legal rules, which would “apply equally to everybody” (p. 153) and mirror the “impersonal” (p. 4) calculations of market mechanisms. Hayek’s belief in the market as a surrogate expression of procedural fairness was opposed to laws contaminated by explicitly moral objectives, where subjective evaluations of “merit” (p. 94), driven by the demands of various interest groups, override the objectivity of market measures of value. Taken to its extreme, the market becomes the proxy of a residual morality, because its judgments are deemed to be more epistemologically reliable (Mirowski, 2013) than the arbitrary morality of politically motivated agents claiming the mantle of the public good. Market mechanisms are lauded for giving individuals the institutional means to pursue their own moral ends, against the rationality of a social order governed by collectivist moral objectives.

Hayek’s argument resonates with commonplace moral themes of the neoliberal era—in the valorization of economic freedom, individual responsibility and entrepreneurship, and in the antagonism toward the welfare state, “left-liberal” elites, and politics itself. These ideas also found expression in rational choice/public choice theories that stress the self-interested nature of human motivations and the essentially hypocritical character of arguments made in the name of the common good (Hay, 2007). One clear expression of these antagonisms is generalized attacks against public servants, for their bureaucratic stifling of individual entrepreneurship and access to employment protections not available to people in the private sector. Union-supported public workers become symbols of the moral corrosiveness of the welfare state, insulated from marketized regimes of customer accountability and performance scrutiny. They are cast as the symbols of “a disease spreading through the social body destroying initiative, innovation [and] creativity” (Du Gay, 1996, p. 71), featherbedded by rules at odds with market rationality. Dramatizing the symptoms therefore becomes a crucial element of what Jamie Peck (2010) calls the “rollback phase” of neoliberalism focused on ideologically discrediting residues of a welfarist Keynesian state.

One profession routinely targeted by these neoliberal critiques is public school teachers. They and their union representatives are censured for upholding the educational status quo, even in contexts where government funding of public education has been significantly downgraded (Taubman, 2009). These arguments have gained traction in a policy environment that emphasizes the centrality of education in creating an economically productive workforce. Representations of teachers become dichotomized either through the image of the teacher as potential national economic savior, or—when they inevitably fail to

match that ideal—as antiquated buffoons impeding economic progress and educational reforms (Taubman, 2009). Enterprise culture took hold within teaching through valorization of the figure of the reflexive professional, who demonstrates his or her dedication to perpetual self-improvement through ritualized performances of quality (Ball, 2001). Teachers who fail the quality mark within this field of judgment are represented as not only antientrepreneurial in their own right but also censured for inhibiting children's innate entrepreneurial qualities.

These critiques are often articulated as part of a narrative about the failures of public education, and interspersed with arguments calling for educational reform, choice and the redirection of public education budgets to private interests (Janice Peck, 2015). As we will see, these discourses are at the heart of our analysis of Campbell Brown, who, in many respects, reiterates a long-standing neoliberal critique of America's public schools. Before we consider her case, however, we need to say more about our understanding of neoliberalism, especially in light of our use of discourse theory.

Discourse Theory, Antagonism, and the Fantasmatic

Our theoretical and methodological approach derives from the discourse theoretical tradition associated with Ernesto Laclau, including his collaborative work with Chantal Mouffe. Unlike other discourse analysis approaches with their disciplinary origins in linguistics, discourse theory emerged from the field of critical political theory, and Laclau and Mouffe's formulation of a social ontology that brings together Marxist, poststructuralist, and phenomenological insights. As an analytical resource, discourse theory is typically applied to "empirical case studies, rather than the technical analysis of discourse viewed narrowly as speech or text" (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 1), thus departing from the stricter demarcations of text and context seen in conventional linguistic analysis. The guiding theoretical premise treats the social as a "field of discursivity" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112); discourse is conceptualized as a structured relation between different social practices, not just narrowly defined linguistic elements. The "objectivity" of the social order is theorized as a "radically contingent" (Laclau, 1990, p. 193) horizon, an inherently political site of hegemonic contestation between different groups and interests, as opposed to some naturalized or scientific conception of society.

Here is not the place for an elaborate discussion of discourse theory. But let us clarify how one of Laclau's (1990) key concepts—antagonism—informs our conception of neoliberalism. Laclau describes antagonism as a simultaneously necessary and impossible feature of social life (Thomassen, 2005). Antagonisms are necessary because for there to be any politics at all, we need discursive contestation over how society should be constituted. Yet they are also impossible, because antagonistic representations rely on the exclusion of heterogeneous elements that, if articulated, might undermine their ideological coherence.

Take, for instance, the archetypal neoliberal dichotomy of market–state. This discursive opposition has been one of the hallmark features of neoliberal political formations since the 1970s. Recall the strident free market rhetoric of Thatcher and Reagan, or political decisions that saw the closing down or privatization of state-owned industries deemed no longer viable in a market-centric environment.

However, as suggested earlier, the notion of a pure antagonism between market and state is also untenable, for the simple reason that the political project of making a neoliberal social order is ultimately contingent on internalizing it within the field of the state. For example, consider the role played by the state in reinstating neoliberal policies after the 2008 financial crisis (Mirowski, 2013). Thus, we might describe the heterogeneous element in classic free-market rhetoric as an unarticulated discourse about the importance of state instruments, laws, and policies to the social organization of markets.

Laclau's distinction between antagonism and heterogeneity offers two stylized ways of conceptualizing neoliberal discourse (Phelan, 2014).³ The first discourse is mobilized around seemingly clear-cut antagonisms between market–state, individual–collective, negative freedom–positive freedom, and so on. In formal discourse theoretical terms, a “logic of equivalence” (Laclau, 2005) or sameness crystallizes the ideological links between the signifiers market, individual, and economic freedom, while an antithetical logic of equivalence disidentifies with the categories of state and collective, and the “do-gooder” politics of positive freedom. This perspective conceptualizes neoliberalism in negative terms—as a political rationality premised on strong antipathy toward collectivist and socialist discourses. The second discourse works in protean ways by combining neoliberal logics with fragments of other ideologies and discourses, including potentially progressive discourses that, on the surface, signify opposition to neoliberalism. For instance, let us imagine market-centric policies that are articulated with a commitment to combating social exclusion. Accordingly, it is sometimes performed as an anti-ideological or postideological discourse, because it is self-construed as rejecting some archetypal free market identity.

The distinction between antagonism and heterogeneity maps on to Laclau's (2005) account of populism. Populist formations are aligned to the antagonistic pole, and discourses that construct the desired identity of “the people” in opposition to some establishment Other. The role of psychoanalytical dynamics in this Othering dynamic assumed increased importance in Laclau's work from the early 1990s onward and has been further explored by second-generation discourse theorists like Glynos and Stavrakakis (2004). Glynos and Howarth (2007) highlight the role of “fantasmatic logics” (p. 107) in explaining the subjective “grip” of ideologies, as part of their development of an approach to social analysis organized around discourse theory. Fantasmatic logics signify the psychic and affective dynamics that structure subjects' fantasy-based identifications with particular discourses, and conversely their antagonism toward various Othered identities that impede the full realization of the fantasy identity.

For example, consider a fantasmatic narrative organized around the utopia of a fully privatized schooling system, where students and teachers experience none of the failings of a public school system and are free to control their own destiny. The narrative offers an “image of fullness, wholeness or harmony” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 130) that energizes the subject, but which is simultaneously thwarted by various exemplary figures, such as recalcitrant teaching unions, incompetent teachers, or weak-willed politicians. Glynos and Howarth (2007) identify two fantasmatic narratives that resonate with our case study: the beatific, “that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome,” and the

³ At its simplest, Laclau describes antagonism and heterogeneity as two ways of understanding what is excluded from a discourse. An antagonistic identity is organized around the exclusion of an explicitly represented Other, whereas heterogeneity signifies excluded elements that are not represented as such.

horrific, “which foretells a disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable” (p. 147). As we will see, these narratives texture Brown’s appeal to different subject positions (parent, child, trade unionist, politician, etc.) as part of her intermittent representations of teachers as heroic or despicable figures.

Campbell Brown and the Politics of Education Reform

Our empirical focus here is on Campbell Brown’s emergence as an education campaigner. Yet it is important to stress how her discursive identity is made possible by logics, tropes, and assumptions that are already textured into mainstream media and political representations of education reform (Janice Peck, 2015; Scott, 2012, 2013). The assumed view of a dysfunctional public education system in need of a private-sector overhaul is not just the domain of Republicans, political conservatives, and evangelical free marketeers. On the contrary, a marketized education reform agenda was also at the core of the education policies of the Obama administration and previously visible in the Clinton presidency’s enthusiasm for public funding of private-sector charter schools (Janice Peck, 2015). Janice Peck (2015) reflects on how a particular narrative of education reform has been naturalized in a wider field of popular culture, influenced by—among other things—the despairing portrait of U.S. public schools articulated in critically acclaimed documentaries like *Waiting for Superman*, the mainstream media’s fondness for the “liberal tropes of freedom, choice and equality of opportunity” (p. 591) invoked by reformers, and the strategic coupling of the motif of “school choice” to a racially inflected civil rights agenda (Scott, 2013). She argues that the media authority of the reform narrative can ultimately be explained by the money interests behind it—namely, a class alliance of billionaire philanthropists and hedge fund managers with a strategic interest in seeing a redirection of public education budgets to the private sector.

Our analysis of Brown therefore touches on themes with a long political history, and with particular New York resonances that can be traced back to the work done by the Manhattan Institute think tank in the late 1970s and 1980s in “laying the groundwork for the neoliberalization of education policy” (Janice Peck, 2015, p. 590). Our case also recalls the high media profile of other “education entrepreneurs” (Janice Peck, 2015), including Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, DC, schools, and Eva Moskowitz, founder of the Success Academy Charter School network in New York City that lists Brown on its board of directors. We chart the development of Brown’s discourse over three approximate chronological periods, which are defined by shifts in the target of political antagonism, areas of moral problematization, institutional identities and rhetorical styles. We explore how they come together as strategic expressions of a neoliberalized educational agenda, with particular attention to her media interventions and visibility.

The first period centers on Brown’s emergence as a polarizing educational advocate from July 2012 to April 2014, primarily through the articulation of the “teacher as sexual predator” trope under the banner of the Parents’ Transparency Project. This thematic was publicized through different media interventions, including a public Twitter dispute with Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). It was also the focal point of a New York TV advertising campaign, which criticized city mayoral candidates for failing to confront teachers’ unions.

The second period focuses on Brown's role in publicizing the significance of a June 2014 Californian legal ruling that declared the state's teaching tenure laws unconstitutional. Brown's hostility to unions was now energized by what she saw as their featherbedding of the figure of "the grossly ineffective teacher," as a general symbol of the moral corrosiveness of U.S. public education. The ruling crystalized the strategic remit of a new organizational identity established by Brown in December 2013, the Partnership for Educational Justice. The organization provided free legal assistance to a New York lawsuit in June 2014 that sought to replicate the Californian case, in the name of students and families who have been "let down" by the education establishment.

The final period centers on Brown's membership of the board of directors of the Success Academy Charter Schools Network and her establishment in July 2015 of *The 74* as a "non-profit, non-partisan news site covering education in America" ("About Us," 2015, para. 1). The moment signaled a heightened intermeshing of the political, legal, and journalistic aspects of Brown's identity, through a Success Academy lawsuit against New York City, a public clash with New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, and her staging of "education summits" for U.S. presidential candidates. It also accentuated the ideologically paradoxical aspects of Brown's rhetoric between, on the one hand, her appeal to a nonpartisan moral identity outside of politics and, on the other, her eclectic articulation of different discourses that fluctuate between appropriation of a civil rights agenda and a corporate libertarian stance that questions the presumption of state regulatory oversight.

Antiunion Antagonisms and the "Sexual-Predator Teacher"

The first public sign of Brown's new identity was a speech she gave at an Education Reform Commission forum held by New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo on July 26, 2012. One of several organized statewide, the meeting was framed by the perennial performative requirement to improve the city's "schools while also cutting costs" (Decker, 2012a, para. 6). Brown's appearance as top speaker on a panel about "teacher quality" reportedly "surprised" some attendees, particularly when she departed from her written testimony and cited examples—"complete with names and salacious details"—of three teachers who had kept their jobs "despite being found to have behaved inappropriately" (Decker, 2012b, para. 8) toward students. Brown (2012) recycled the same anecdotes in her first education op-ed commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* three days later, published under the headline "Teachers Unions Go to Bat for Sexual Predators." Its publication was synchronized with other media interventions. Brown appeared on the July 30 edition of *Morning Joe* (Maresca, 2012), whose principal host, former Republican Congressman Joe Scarborough, has been described as "a vocal critic of teachers unions" (Decker, 2012b, para. 13). She also tweeted the article to the Twitter account of AFT leader Randi Weingarten on July 31, with the question, "Why is teachers union protecting teachers who commit sexual misconduct?"

Brown's op-ed captures the discursive logic underpinning her emergence as an education campaigner. It articulates a compelling moral narrative that juxtaposes different roles: the innocent victim (the sexually abused child), the horrific pervert (the sexual-predator teacher), the pervert's amoral protectors (teachers' unions), the corrupt bureaucrat (the arbitrator of sexual misconduct cases), the disempowered agent (New York City's schools chancellor) and the potential savior (the New York state legislature). It presupposes an archetypal neoliberal construction of the educational establishment.

Teachers' trade unions are depicted as the main powerbrokers in an antiquated system, also enabled by bureaucratic and political interests unwilling to confront the perverse moral consequences of union power.

Brown (2012) argues that unions' power over the officially "neutral" arbitrators is the primary reason for the inadequate response to sexual misconduct cases. Because of their institutional obligation to represent their collective membership, the unions refuse to demarcate "sexual-predator teachers" as different, "defending all teachers no matter what they have done" (para. 16). In addition, the supposedly independent adjudications of the arbitrators cannot be trusted, because "their livelihood depends on pleasing" (para. 7) the unions.⁴ This closed disciplinary system permits (some) "sexual-predator teachers" to effectively retain their positions, despite evidence of abhorrent behavior.

In Brown's telling, the unions' position does not derive from any immoral desire to harm children, but rather from an amorality emblematic of a structural inability of public sector institutions—particularly when dominated by a strong union base—to take actions based on the requirements of other interests. Consistent with the common sense projections of rational choice theory (Hay, 2007), teachers unions are represented as inherently self-interested agents, unthinkingly defending their membership, irrespective of the moral implications. Brown identifies a potential beatific savior to this moral impasse, in the form of draft New York state legislation that would give the city's school chancellor CEO-style decision-making power in such cases. However, she surmises that it "has little chance of success without union support—which is hardly assured" (Brown, 2012, para. 15). In effect, the coercive power of teachers unions over New York education bureaucrats is extended to the state legislature, and a political class unwilling to introduce any law that risks antagonizing the unions.

Brown's provocative tweet to Weingarten amplified her antagonistic representations of unions, and led to what was reported as "a furious 48-hour exchange" (Decker, 2012b, para. 2) between them. Instead of interrogating Brown's claims about unions' handling of sexual misconduct cases, Weingarten responded with various counteraccusations, linking Brown to a right-wing organization that disparages teacher unions in order to conceal their real interests in privatizing public education. The two had a second public exchange in January 2014, following Brown's (2014a) publication of another op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*. Brown again accused unions—"the most powerful constituency in education"—of "making it more difficult to protect children from molesters" (para. 13), this time by allegedly impeding the passage of federal legislation to introduce uniform criminal background checks for school employees.

Brown again baited Weingarten on Twitter, querying the AFT's opposition to legislation that has "overwhelming bipartisan support." On this occasion Weingarten (2014) refrained from immediately responding, instead writing a letter to *The Wall Street Journal* interrogating Brown's misrepresentation of the AFT's position, suggesting it was equally committed to keeping "our children and our classrooms safe" (para. 1) and had merely raised concerns about "due process" (para. 4) intended "to make the legislation stronger" (para. 3). Nonetheless, Weingarten's response illustrated Brown's relative success in establishing the figure of the sexual-predator teacher as an object of education policy discourse, especially in linking it to the question of contractual arrangements for disciplining teachers. The place of Brown's

⁴ Brown's narrative obscures that the selection of arbitrators also needs city approval.

media profile in making it so was captured in a tense exchange between her and UFT President Michael Mulgrew (Anand, 2013) at a public meeting in August 2013 (which was captured in a video clip uploaded to the *Chalkbeat* educational news site), after she asked a question from the audience about sexual misconduct cases. After characterizing Brown's "allegations as misleading," Mulgrew shouted down her attempts to formulate a second question with the barbed observation, "I'm sorry, you can ask *The Daily News*⁵ to take a full page picture of you if you want, and get it in again; I know that you like papers" (video clip).

Brown introduced herself to Mulgrew as a representative of the Parents' Transparency Project, which became her primary campaigning vehicle after its establishment in June 2013. Describing itself as "a watchdog group whose mission is to expose deals that put special-interest groups ahead of NYC students" (Parents' Transparency Project, 2013, para. 1), the organization was prolific in circulating the trope of the teacher as "sexual predator," citing the phrase in 23 of 55 Facebook posts between July and November 2013. It also launched a TV advertising campaign in July 2013 that targeted the four candidates in the New York City mayoral election. Accompanied by an eerie soundtrack, the voiceover depicted the four politicians as "know[ing]" about the "horror stories of sexual predators preying on children in schools," but "yet they remain silent" because they are "too afraid of the teachers union to protect our kids" ("Campbell Brown", 2013, video clip). Brown continued her campaigning on the issue after the election, establishing CommonSenseContract.com in April 2014 with the aim of influencing the city's contract negotiations with the UFT.

Brown articulated an antagonistic discourse that constructs the problem of union power as a general problem of politics, redolent of the "institutionalized antiinstitutionalism" (Davies, 2014, p. 2) of neoliberal regimes. In contrast, she emphasizes the "nonpartisan" nature of her own activism; what she presents as an essentially apolitical moral agenda that transcends political antagonisms between Democrats and Republicans.

The "Grossly Incompetent Teacher" and Politics by Other Means

In what became known as the "*Vergara* ruling," in June 2014 a California regional court upheld the plaintiffs' claims that the state's teacher tenure laws enable the retention of "grossly ineffective teachers," which unfairly discriminates against the educational rights of poor and minority students (*Vergara v. California*, 2014). Over the next four months, Brown and her latest organizational identity, the Partnership for Educational Justice (PEJ), unveiled a media-legal strategy centered on filing a similar suit in New York. The PEJ provided free legal assistance to the nine parent plaintiffs linked to the *Wright v. New York* (2014) lawsuit. The money was provided by funding sources that Brown refused to publicly reveal, but which *Inside Philanthropy* speculates are "in all likelihood . . . the usual suspects . . . who give money to pro-charter and education reform groups: Teach for America, Achievement First, the New Teacher Project, and so on" (Callahan, 2014, para. 7).⁶ Brown's easy access to high-profile media outlets

⁵ The Parents' Transparency Project worked with the *New York Daily News* in investigating cases where teachers retained their positions following accusations of sexual misconduct.

⁶ The authors e-mailed the PEJ to clarify its funding sources, but received no reply.

was again central to the strategy. She championed the significance of the legal cases in three *NY Daily News* op-eds, two more interviews on *Morning Joe*, plus appearances on *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and *The Colbert Report*. Brown was also cited in a controversial November 2014 *TIME* magazine cover story about the *Vergara* case (Sweetland Edwards, 2014), which appeared under the headline “Rotten Apples: It’s Nearly Impossible to Fire a Bad Teacher; Some Tech Millionaires May Have Found a Way to Change That.” The cover generated what was reported as a “furious” counterresponse on social media (Klein, 2014) and was construed as representing a generalized attack on teachers, particularly because of the provocative visual image of a judge’s gavel in position to smash an apple. Brown (2014b) was one of a select group that *TIME* invited to respond to the article, which she defended despite her regret over how the “label and imagery” of the cover “overshadowed the substantive reality explored in the piece” (para. 1).

Illustrating an increasingly PR-conscious strategy, the introduction to Brown’s *Morning Joe* (“This Is Not Anti-Teacher,” 2014) interview of August 4 featured a still image of her as the speaker at a stage-managed PEJ protest outside New York City Hall, flanked by Black parents and students, including some holding placards petitioning demands for “educational justice.” The image’s appropriation of civil rights motifs (Scott, 2013), and its implicit troubling of the partisan divisions that regulate hegemonic representations of American politics, was noted in host Scarborough’s introduction. Formulating a question to Brown’s cointerviewee, the just-announced chairperson of the PEJ, “star trial lawyer” David Boies, Scarborough suggested “this is no longer a Republican/Democrat, conservative/liberal issue,” (“This Is Not Anti-Teacher,” 2014, video clip) to the assent of his interviewee.

Like its New York analogue, the *Vergara* case was made in the name of nine claimants from minority ethnicity and working-class backgrounds, but funded by corporate—in this case Silicon Valley—donors (Sweetland Edwards, 2014). The PEJ’s rhetorical strategy of appealing to progressive symbols was mirrored in the *Vergara* ruling of Judge Rolf M. Treu (*Vergara v. California*, 2014). Judge Treu drew analogies to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, citing a 1954 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that established school segregation by race as unconstitutional. The plaintiffs questioned the constitutionality of specific tenure laws, all concerned with the hiring and firing of teachers—namely, statutes guaranteeing teachers “permanent employment” (p. 3) after a two-year probationary period, subjecting dismissal cases to elaborate “due process” (p. 6) deliberations, and deciding any forced redundancies by the “last-in-first-out” (p. 3) principle. Treu ruled that the statutes amounted to legislative impediments to the students’ right to “equality of educational opportunity” (p. 2), since they made it difficult for schools to remove “grossly ineffective teachers” (p. 7) and therefore impeded “the quality of the educational experience” (p. 2). He cited a 2007 California Department of Education report that suggested these problems disproportionately affected students in “high-poverty, low-performing schools” (p. 15) because they are more likely to be taught by ineffective teachers. The discrimination was compounded by a patterned “churning” (p. 15) of incompetent teachers back into poorer schools, who remain in the public school system because of the labyrinthine nature of the dismissal laws.

Judge Treu’s reasoning was perfectly embodied in Brown’s rhetorical construction of the legal cases, especially through her repeated foregrounding of the horrific figure of the grossly ineffective teacher. Within mainstream media, the successful legal challenge conferred institutional legitimacy to the

PEJ's cause (further enhanced by the affiliation with the impeccably liberal Boies) and allowed Brown to move away from the tabloidized style of the sexual-predator teacher trope. The figure of the grossly ineffective teacher summons a distinct horrific narrative and a fatalistic vision of America's economic future. Students denied the right to equality of education opportunities are condemned to a future life of unproductivity and underperformance; as Boies observed on *Morning Joe*, "if they don't get a good education . . . they are lost to this country, they are lost to their families," and thus imperil America's ability to "compete globally" ("This Is Not Anti-Teacher," 2014, video clip). The grossly ineffective teacher embodies an affectively charged warning against the dangers of the horrific path, which intermeshes with the parental anxieties primed by the figure of the sexual-predator teacher. The horrific path finds concrete redress in the removal of antiquated tenure laws that are a legacy of trade unions' authority under the Keynesian welfare state. The horrific narrative has its beatific antidote in the figure of the individual teacher who is treated like a professional, no longer burdened by the oppressive collectivism of trade unions. As Brown suggested in an August 4 appearance on MSNBC's *Hardball* with Chris Matthews ("Campbell Brown", 2014), the PEJ campaign is not about attacking teachers, but "about professionalizing teachers, and evaluating them, and giving them performance pay, and treating them like individuals" (video clip).

Brown's televised accounts of the legal cases amplify a populist discourse already discernible in our first moment, centered on a generalized antagonist of the educational "status quo." On the identificatory side of the populist frontier, the rights of "minority children and parents" stand in metonymically for "the people" and are rendered equivalent to the experiences of "parent groups around the country" who "want "to voice their frustration with the system that they think is failing them." ("This Is Not Anti-Teacher," 2014, video clip) On the disidentificatory side are two familiar neoliberal antagonists: self-interested unions hiding behind a spurious claim to represent the interests of all teachers and a weak-willed political class unwilling to confront the deleterious consequences of union power.

Yet Brown also appeals to a political subjectivity that belies some archetypal free market script and cultivates forms of populist and moral identification typically associated with the political left (or, in the vernacular of U.S. politics, "progressive liberals"). These ideologically heterogeneous elements are exemplified by the appropriation of civil rights and social movement motifs in PEJ publicity. But they are also embodied in the naming of PEJ, and the distinctly non-Hayekian appeal to "educational justice."

However, these heterogeneous signifiers are ultimately subsumed into a neoliberal strategy that embodies a "disenchantment" (Davies, 2014) with formal politics and which instead pursues politics through other means, namely through court cases that seek to override the authority of existing tenure laws and replace them with a market-friendly legal regime. This "economization of the law" (Davies, 2014) was perfectly captured in the moral register of Judge Treu's ruling. He cited supporting research—evidence so "compelling" that it "shocks the conscience" (p. 7)—that purported to measure the "specific effect of grossly ineffective teachers" (p. 7) by calculating the resulting loss of "lifetime earnings per classroom" (p. 7). The atmosphere of political disenchantment is personified, in turn, by PEJ's image of parents frustrated by "years of legislative inaction and inertia," forced to turn "to the courts as a last resort" (Brown, 2014b, para. 7). The rhetoric strives to give a semblance of radical democratic empowerment to an elite-driven campaign seeking political agency through the expert judgment of judges. The strategy illustrates a

preference for technocratic and legalistic solutions to political problems especially marked in Third-Way iterations of neoliberalism (Davies, 2014; Hay, 2007), though, conversely, PEJ's appeal to the Third-Way trope of "partnership" noticeably departs from the typical emphasis on a partnership of state and market. Instead, partnership signifies a solidarity platform for students, families, and communities, in opposition to the antiquated priorities of a state–union establishment.

Advocacy Journalism and Charter School Evangelism

In July 2015, Brown launched *The 74*—her third organizational identity in three years—which describes itself as "a non-profit, non-partisan news site covering education in America" ("About Us," 2015, para. 1). Unapologetic about blurring the boundaries between political advocacy and journalism (Brown, 2015), the stated "mission" of the new organization is to combat the "misinformation and political spin" allegedly dominating education debates, instead promising to lead "an honest, fact-based conversation" ("About Us," 2015, para. 1). *The 74* offers a variant of Brown's earlier framing of her position as "common-sense," "non-partisan" and deriving from "the people," in opposition to the education establishment. However, it also reorients her strategy toward the broader terrain of cultural representations about education rather than simply specific policies and legislation.

This expanded emphasis can be interpreted as an attempt to combat what Brown and her allies perceive as the enduring political influence of the teaching unions at different administrative levels. With the radar on the 2016 presidential election (and the immediate challenge of countering Bernie Sanders's campaign), the Democratic Party establishment, including Hilary Clinton, increasingly positioned themselves in 2015 as on the side of a popular backlash against the rhetoric of educational choice, thus disrupting Brown's image of a nonpartisan alignment of Republicans and Democrats against the status quo. Ironically, the increasing visibility of Brown as a unifying antagonist of the major unions and radical teacher organizations, such as the Badass Teachers Association, contributed to this backlash. In a reverberation of the antagonisms generated by *TIME*'s "Rotten Apples" cover, Moore (2016) suggests that 2015 and 2016 saw "charter school supporters . . . being outmaneuvered on many fronts, from social media . . . to politics" (para. 9).

Accordingly, to bolster the preferred reform agenda, *The 74* invited the Republican and Democratic presidential primary candidates to two separate education forums less than a month after its launch, both moderated by Brown and broadcast online. The six remaining Republican candidates attended their forum on August 19; however, the three Democratic candidates all declined the invitation. Brown rationalized the latter's nonappearance by invoking the figure of a coercive union movement, suggesting "the teachers unions have gotten to these candidates" (Brown, as cited in Grunwald, 2015, para. 4). She later added a new provocative element to her antagonistic representation of unions by linking the Trump campaign's racialized appeals to White America to the unions' "stand against charter schools and private schools" (Brown, 2016a, para. 4), which she recontextualizes as symptoms of America's "agonizing failure to educate black and brown children historically" (para. 2). This overt allusion to U.S. racial politics, set alongside appeals to "school choice," was a feature of Brown's rhetoric during this period. It crystallized in the beatific image of the defenseless minority child, victimized by a failing

public school system, and positioned as beyond the redemption of public policies (and even the law courts, not least because of the overturning of the *Vergara* ruling by the California Court of Appeal in April 2016).⁷

The figure of the defenseless child is foregrounded in the semiotics of The 74 website (“About Us,” 2015), which refers to the “74 million children under the age of 18” whose potential is undermined by a “public education system . . . in crisis” (para. 1). The launch video features parents standing with their children (most of whom appear to be ethnic minority identities) demanding transparency from an education establishment that denies them clear information about what is going on in their schools. In contrast, The 74 is represented as a source of collective empowerment, which will give parents access to stories about “what great teaching looks like” and “news about school choice” (para. 2). The populist agency of the neglected child is underlined at the end of the video, with different students pronouncing “I am the 74 million” (implicitly recalling—even if the register is appropriately individualized—the “we are the 99%” slogan of the Occupy movement).

The ethnic-minority child centers a strategic narrative where they are depicted as at risk from the self-serving, amoral machinations of collectivist institutions. The emphasis recalls the educational discourses of neoconservatives and the religious right, which have historically problematized children of color as Others, at heightened risk of delinquency and regularly the focus of moral panics (Apple, 2006; Scott, 2013). Much of the discursive agency of American neoliberalism has been animated by conservative fears of (statist) moral decline. In that vein, Brown evokes the rhetorical style of Christian evangelism in a March 2016 op-ed for the *New York Post*, representing her “mission” as one almost religiously devoted to the moral responsibility of saving the children. Rather than the prospect of eternal damnation, Brown avows to save the children from a stifling public school system—a horrific future of anonymity and underachievement removed from the individualizing dynamism of enterprise culture; a life where students are “released into the world without the skills or knowledge they need to live productively” (Brown, 2016b, para. 6).

The particular op-ed highlights an acrimonious dispute between Success Academy Charter Schools and the New York City government. In early 2014, Bill de Blasio was elected mayor of New York with a campaign promise of universal prekindergarten (pre-K) education. The disagreement derived from Success Academy’s refusal to sign a contract with the city, which would have brought the former’s pre-K program under the latter’s regulatory oversight. The antagonism was amplified by public comments from de Blasio that criticized charter schools, and Success Academy specifically, for unleashing “millions of dollars’ worth of television advertisements against him” (Taylor, 2016, para. 7).

Success Academy announced in June 2016 its “decision to close its pre-K program, rather than run it under city oversight” (Brown, 2016b, para. 2), which de Blasio responded to by suggesting “they need to figure out when to give it a rest” (as cited in Brown, 2016b, para. 1). Brown represents de Blasio’s comments as emblematic of a public bureaucracy that fosters mediocrity and underachievement, therefore blocking access to equal educational opportunities for minority children. In deliberate contrast to the

⁷ The court ruled the statutes are not unconstitutional, whatever about their potential application in administrative regimes that condone and rotate ineffective teachers (Fensterwald, 2016).

passivity of de Blasio's "rest" comment, Brown underlines the purposefulness of Success Academy's remit, insisting, "No, Mr. Mayor," "we won't rest" or "downshift our mission" until students in publicly run schools "get the same chance" (para. 20) as students flourishing in Success Academy schools. The empirical trajectory of our case study therefore ends in a stand-off between the city government and the corporate interests of Success Academy, where the presumption of state regulatory authority is cast as an illegitimate infringement on the (market) sovereignty of the charter school network. Brown's rhetoric suggests this state-phobia is not incidental: "We have fought for 10 years to build schools free from any influence that might dilute or compromise our program for our students. Our independence from district oversight is inextricable from that program" (Brown, 2016b, para. 12).

Conclusion

This article examined the neoliberalized character of the political antagonisms animating Campbell Brown's emergence as a significant figure in media debates about U.S. education. We focused on Brown's shifting construction (through various organizational identities) of different antagonists, which cohere in the image of an inert educational establishment indifferent to the concerns of parents and children. The first period focused on what Brown suggested was teachers unions' failure to address the problem of sexual predators in the classroom. The inadequate response was represented as exemplifying the depraved moral consequences of unions' self-interested power, alongside the complicity of a wider set of bureaucratic and political interests. In the second period, Brown's portrait of a dysfunctional education system morphed into a critique of how teaching tenure laws condone a culture of "grossly incompetent teachers," to the particular detriment of minority children attending poorer schools. Energized by a California court ruling that declared the state's tenure laws to be unconstitutional, Brown stressed the empowering potential for parents and children of similar legal cases elsewhere, in marked contrast to the failure of union-dominated state legislatures. Brown's appeal to a regime of "educational justice" beyond the state assumed a sharper corporate register in the final period, as illustrated by the antipathy of the Success Academy network of charter schools to the regulatory authority of the New York City government. In tandem, Brown's profile as a media authority on educational matters was institutionalized in the establishment of *The 74*, as a general repository of educational news.

Considered from the perspective of our initial discussion of the relationship between morality and neoliberal discourse, Brown articulates a political identity that, in a quintessential neoliberal fashion, dramatizes what she constructs as the moral bankruptcy of teaching unions and stresses their coercive control over state institutions. Unions are represented as nothing other than self-interested actors, whose power is embedded in antiquated state structures that impede the development of a modern education system. These antiunion and antistatist reflexes are juxtaposed with Brown's advocacy of a market-centric vision of education, which is responsive to the needs of individual children and anticipates their requirements for future economic success and competitive advantage. It also promises a culture of professionalism and entrepreneurship among teachers, once liberated from the collectivist diktats of unions' policies and evaluated for their individual performances. Not to mind the argument that market assumptions are already internalized in union-sanctioned quality-assessment regimes (Weiner, 2012), Brown's rhetoric casts teaching unions as agents wholly opposed to market rationality, the lynchpins of an educational establishment somehow untouched by market-centric policies since the 1980s.

Brown appeals to a political subjectivity that rubbishes the notion of unions as envoys of the common good. However, unlike some neoliberal archetype that disparages the very idea of the common good and the pursuit of a morally inflected politics, Brown's discourse is replete with moralizing appeals that recast the pursuit of "educational justice" within a corporatized and privatized frame. Brown's discourse therefore exhibits ideologically protean qualities emblematic of a wider regime of "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002); indeed, a logic of negative freedom, fixated on the coercive power of a state–union complex, is intermixed with avowals of the positive freedoms enabled by market structures. Affirmations of the supremacy of charter schools are strategically articulated with progressive appeals to social justice, civil rights, racial equality, grassroots activism, class consciousness, and individual empowerment, and centered above all on the civic agency of parents and children. These discourses do not necessarily take the form of a blanket opposition to state-centered structures; as Brown intimates on occasion, the latter could potentially be reconstituted in more agreeable forms. Nonetheless, the libertarian telos of her position is captured in the insistence on the operational autonomy of Success Academy, as if the very idea of state oversight constituted an affront to a corporate regime of educational justice.

Brown's role as the PR-front of shadowy corporate interests that want to privatize the education system textures left-wing critiques of her educational advocacy. And for good reason: Her interventions have been enabled by generally anonymous forms of corporate support. Announcing organizational identities under the mantle of the Parents' Transparency Project and Partnership for Educational Justice, while refusing to identify funders, clearly invites the epithet of front groups. There is also something quite outrageous—however banal—about claiming ownership of the general category of "parents," given the absence of any evidence of an organizational base of parental support, in contrast, we might add, to the forms of moral authority embedded in the representational and democratic architecture of trade unions.

Nonetheless, we think it would be a mistake to dismiss Brown as nothing other than a corporate puppet, as some are inclined to do. Rather, her case illustrates the strategic importance of mediated logics to the constitution of neoliberal policy regimes. This political rationality is now institutionalized in a charter-school-friendly news site, which has already taken over financially vulnerable educational news outlets (Holloway, 2016). Unlike Brown's other organizations, The 74 lists different "supporters" and "partners" at its website, mainly philanthropic foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies. In the context of the present, one name stands out above others, The Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation, now that the Trump administration has appointed Betsy DeVos as education secretary. With the presence of such a noted charter school advocate in Trump's cabinet, we can only conclude—pessimistically—that the discourses and fantasmatic narratives structuring Brown's campaigning will become even more salient to debates about U.S. public education in the immediate years ahead.

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The Morality and Political Antagonisms of Neoliberal Discourse: Campbell Brown and the Corporatization of Educational Justice

Salter, LA

2017
