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A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

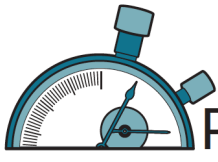
The Racial Veil: Small Government Rhetoric, Neoliberalism, and School Resegregation

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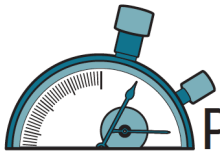
The Racial Veil: Small Government Rhetoric, Neoliberalism, and School Resegregation

Jeffrey Gross

For the 2013-2014 school year and following a year of legal delays, Memphis City Schools, a predominantly African-American district, merged with Shelby County Schools, a predominantly white and middle class suburban school district.¹ The merger was temporary, as suburban municipalities battled in court and through their state legislators to form their own school districts and to separate from the county district. By fall 2014, with help from the Tennessee legislature in the form of a law change that allowed the creation of new school districts, the six municipalities in the former Shelby County Schools district seceded to create their own schools, leaving the merged Shelby County Schools district existing as the previous Memphis City Schools under a different name.² Of the six new municipal school districts, only Millington had fewer than 50% white students; the other five districts ranged from 62-76% white compared to Shelby County Schools, which had fewer than 8% white students (“Data Available”).³ Advocates for the municipal schools employed a rhetoric of local control, small government, and efficiency to veil the politics of white flight and racial segregation. Their rhetoric draws on two ideologies, Republican ideals of the “Southern Strategy” and neoliberalism, both of which allow those making the arguments to

perpetuate racialized patterns without drawing race or racism into the discourse.

Following the peak of desegregation in 1988, US schools have become increasingly segregated.⁴ Those pushing for segregated school districts employ a rhetorical register where “race” and “racism” are not operative terms; instead, they focus on terms such as freedom, self-government, and local control, all of which cloak historical and contemporary racial dynamics. Using the merger and subsequent fragmentation of Shelby County Schools as a case study, I argue that the small government rhetoric employed in the creation of municipal school districts offers a “safe” way to resegregate school districts. Notably, these shifts draw on rhetoric that emphasizes personal choice and freedom, property values, and a distrust of large government. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, I draw on recent work in rhetoric, history, social theory, and social geography on the role of the Southern Strategy in expanding the geographies of white supremacy. The Southern Strategy, developed in the 1960s by Kevin Phillips, sought to exploit the racial hostility that developed during the Civil Rights Movement to gain white votes for a conservative agenda by appealing to disaffected white voters through often coded racist appeals



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(Inwood 408). Joshua Inwood draws attention to the convergence of neoliberalism and the Southern Strategy: “it is important to see a rhetoric that on the surface argues for market efficiencies in conjunction with efforts to restore class power with broader efforts to reinscribe white privilege and the white spatial imaginary back into the system” (418). Expanding on this link between the Southern Strategy and neoliberalism, I argue proponents of municipal schools in Shelby County, TN, deployed a small government rhetoric of freedom and a neoliberal framework of self-regulation to codify the boundaries of white flight in the geospatial and discursive realms of the new school districts. This rhetoric ultimately undermines the possibility of a shared sense of the commons and disrupts the possibility of a shared public concern for education.

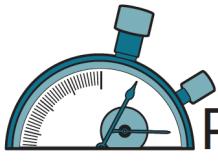
Segregated Rhetoric

Nationally, the resegregation of US schools has been well documented. As early as 2002-2003, 87% of Chicago students were black or Hispanic, and, in Washington, D.C., 94% of students were black or Hispanic (Kozol 41). Since 2001, the number of students attending schools that are over 90% black or Latino and low income has increased by 143% (Klein). Also, with resegregation, the achievement gap between white and nonwhite students has increased steadily over the last three decades. In 1971, for instance, black 13-year-olds scored 39 points lower than white 13-year-olds on standardized reading tests (Hannah-Jones and Glass). By 1988, that gap was down to 18 points (Hannah-Jones and Glass); over seventeen years, the gap was cut in more than half. Today, however, the gap has widened again. The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed a black-white achievement gap that almost

mirrors that shown by the Coleman Report for 1965; for instance, in 2013, the average black twelfth grade high schooler only scored in the 19th percentile for math and the 22nd percentile for reading, up only slightly from the 13th percentile, for both, fifty years prior (Camera). In an era of major education reforms—No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core, among them—the US has moved away from the one strategy that has worked the best to improve the academic performance of black and Hispanic students: integration through busing.

The well-documented resegregation of urban schools should cause alarm, but my focus is to consider how, rhetorically, such a drastic shift toward racial segregation occurs outside a discourse of race. How do the logics of American democracy and American exceptionalism cloak this obvious move toward racial segregation? Candice Rai identifies “democratic rhetorics” as “a tangled discursive web of commonplace myths, symbols, stock tales, and contradictory blueprints for the good life that we collectively associate with democracy.” She labels such rhetoric as “the arsenal of *topoi* that embody democratic ideals, such as freedom, equality, and liberty.” Rai follows Richard Weaver, Kenneth Burke, and others to refer to these terms associated with democratic possibility as “god-terms.”⁵ Vague and impenetrable, these terms represent ideals that cannot easily be argued against. One cannot easily argue against the goals of freedom, yet “freedom” rhetoric cloaks actions and ideologies such as white flight, white supremacy, and exclusion that contradict the supposed goals of American democracy.

The rhetoric of democracy, as used in the early twenty-first century, coincides with a shift in



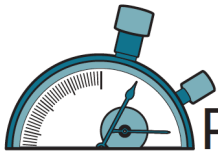
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political values that aligns with the rapid growth of suburbs and exurbs (outer ring suburbs that tend to be whiter, wealthier, and more conservative). Kevin Kruse, in *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, describes the emergent political philosophy of the late twentieth century as one that “accepted as its normative values an individualistic interpretation of ‘freedom of association,’ a fervent faith in free enterprise, and a fierce hostility to the federal government” (Kruse, “Epilogue”). This political ideology privileges isolation, individualism, and privatization (Kruse, “Epilogue”). These trends converge around ideas of personal freedom and choice, which become the metaphorical stand-ins for US democratic values in a post-Reagan neoliberal age when individual choice triumphs over shared sacrifice and private property over common good.

One specific consequence of the US immersion in neoliberalism as the dominant organizing factor is the extent to which citizens become blind to the implications of policies and decisions. For Lakoff and Johnson, the metaphor is the ordering system of our sense of the world (3). Under neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown has recently argued, our lives are reorganized around economic elements, which effectively render impossible our ability to operate under democracy. The conceptual terms under which we think and act limit our range of possibilities. The ubiquity of neoliberal values changes the goals of persons and states. “Both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors,” explains Brown (22). This logic drives people toward competitiveness as a means to enhance their own value.

Suburban Democracy

Within a neoliberal framework, where persons must work to enhance their value, public education becomes a site for competition rather than a common good. Parents have the incentive of making sure their children attend the best-performing districts; therefore, they benefit from separating their districts from lower-performing urban schools. Before and immediately following the Shelby County Schools merger, suburban towns and citizens sought to disrupt and then dismantle the unified school district. Once state law cleared the way, municipalities moved to vote on whether to form their own districts.⁶ The argument for municipal schools relied on the idea that smaller is better. Reporting on a March 2012 rally in Germantown, TN, [a suburb that is 89.5% white](#), Sara Patterson explained that “. . . belief that a smaller school system with 5,000 to 10,000 students would be superior to the future unified system, which would contain around 150,000 students, brought parents” out.⁷ Similarly, Dick Vosburg, supporting Germantown Municipal Schools, suggested that the unified district would be bad for everyone: “A large system would hurt the kids in Memphis, too. . . . We would love to help, but there’s no point sacrificing what kids in Germantown have for that purpose” (qtd. in Patterson). The protesters’ actual motives—racial or not—are obscured by their belief in a commonplace assumption that smaller is better. The large system becomes the stand-in for an un-American hope for larger government, thus obscuring the negative effects of separating affluent white suburban students from poor inner city students of color. The neoliberal drive toward competitiveness also pitches students in Germantown against students in Memphis rather than framing them as a collective whole;



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therefore, Germantown students should not be “sacrificed” for Memphis students, which ensures that lower testing scores and graduation rates, which are rooted in socioeconomic conditions, are not associated with Germantown students.

Similar rhetoric drove the Bartlett Municipal Schools campaign. Bartlett, a first-ring Memphis suburb, is, according to [2010 US Census Bureau data](#), 78.7% white. In 2012, the City of Bartlett disseminated a flier encouraging voters to vote “yes” on the Bartlett Municipal Schools referendum. The flier promised that municipal schools would offer increased accountability: “because Bartlett municipal schools will be managed locally, residents can expect greater control and transparency in how their tax dollars are spent” (qtd. in Wright). The rhetoric of small government prevails, placing the smaller municipality against the larger county.

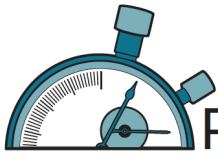
The Better Bartlett Schools organization, a citizen-led group with the mission of “improving education in the City of Bartlett,” asked supporters to share reasons for supporting a separate district. [They curated the collected results in a July 2012 blog post](#).⁸ As the sampling below demonstrates, respondents invoked democratic rhetorics. One supporter, Tamra Layton Gilchrist, for instance, declares only “because I have a voice and a vote that counts.” Another, Shawn Nichols, identifies this same belief in voice: “Smaller districts = less large-scale bureaucracy to wade through, which = more focus on the children and their education. It also gives the parents a larger voice in that education.” For Gilchrist and Nichols, the fear of losing their voices in a larger system justifies supporting a new district; moreover, for Nichols, bureaucracy, the enemy of the Southern Strategy, is also a concern. With the battle of

municipalities against counties, we begin to witness the endgame of the Southern Strategy: every larger unit of government is too big.

As a metaphor, democracy cloaks the exclusions created by this focus on votes and voices. Bartlett alderwoman Emily Elliott frames the need for a municipal school under the rights of democracy, suggesting that “our ability to govern and letting our citizens have what they want” is the fundamental right at stake (qtd. in Mcmillin). The alderwoman upholds the importance of democratic participation in a public sphere—a positive aspect of US society. Consequently, the formation of a municipal school district becomes an issue of American democracy and not a product of white supremacy. The rhetorical strategy is a cunning separation of appearance from reality.⁹

As a whole, the archive of arguments for municipal schools demonstrates a shift toward a neoliberal logic of community; property value and individual rights trump any democratic sense of a shared common good within the broader countywide community. The meaning of “local” shrinks to a smaller scale, often at the expense of those left outside the suburban municipality’s boundaries, sometimes only blocks away. Clint Isenhower, for instance, supports the municipal school for the following reasons: “Localized control and oversight. School board meetings are proximal to my home, not across town. My voice can be heard so much louder rather than in the entirety of Shelby County. Home prices will rise.” Pamela King Murnin also links increased property values with safety and community pride:

Because I think our own schools can make our city a place where people want to raise their children and, therefore, make Bartlett a better place to live. I think it will make



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our property values increase because people will want to lube (sic) here because they feel safe, and they know their kids will get a great education. I would be more than happy to pay higher taxes if it will keep Bartlett a great place to live. I want my kids who are now having children to want to raise their kids here; however, if we don't get our own schools, they will opt to move out of Shelby county, and I can't blame them.

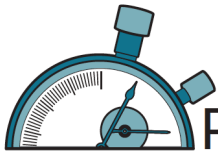
Murnin invokes family closeness, an important value and a god-term in her argument, but she also restricts her sense of community to an immediate suburb of Memphis with a population of just over 54,000 that relies on the larger city for its economic existence; moreover, the shift to an emphasis on property values and security echoes the earliest stages of white flight. The growth of the suburbs were made possible by federal policy that drove the emergence of white suburbs and segregated back urban housing (Erickson 42).¹⁰ Yet, the argument for property value obscures that racial history.

The democratic rhetoric places a rhetorical cloak over the reality that the municipal schools would be predominantly white while the remaining Shelby County District schools would be predominantly African American. The cunning at play in this rhetoric obscures centuries of white supremacist social policy. In fact, one respondent goes so far as to suggest that the issue is not at all racial: "Simple answer: . . . to improve the education of children living in Bartlett . . . to improve our property value . . . I don't see how it's a racial issue . . . We have all races in Bartlett." Angie Estes Farr suggests that she supports the formation of Bartlett Schools because of "community." She reasons that "we will all be more invested in what goes on in the

schools, and we will want the school system to be a success." But the goals and scope of this success are limited to a district of under 10,000 students, the majority of whom are white. Farr does not need to wonder how city schools, where 36% of students (or 40,000 students) have an annual household income of under \$10,000—and 76.6% of students are black and another 12.1% are Latino—will succeed (Hopson; "About Us"). With small government rhetoric, proponents of municipal schools can defend white flight and avoid any mention of race. Although we certainly do not live in a post-racial America, we do too often fall for the ruse of a post-racial rhetoric, one that veils racial histories and patterns that have been factors for decades.

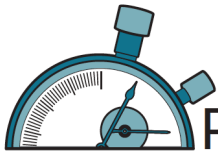
Conclusion: Resegregation and the End of the Commons

Neither Memphis nor the South are alone in the resegregation of American schools. The trend is national. The movement toward resegregation traces back to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and the Gingrich Revolution of the 1990s. In the early twenty-first century, as Kruse notes, we have a moment when suburban politics are not about race on the surface but, knowingly and unknowingly, driven by white supremacy. Yet, in Memphis and nationally, school districts are increasingly racially segregated. In the case of Shelby County, Tennessee, the consolidated school district would have made little difference in the actual demographics of individual schools. A predominantly white school in Germantown would have remained predominantly white; a predominately black school in the Frayser community in North Memphis would have remained predominantly black. The achievement gap would have persisted; however, for the metrics of school



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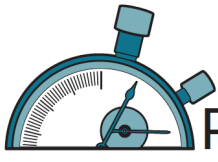
success, the secession of the municipal schools unmoored the municipalities' students from the inner city core, effectively excusing suburban residents from concern for inner city education and rejecting public education as a shared common good. Rather, in an era of [District Report Cards](#), the neoliberal investment in developing human capital and the conservative faith in small government and freedom have converged to provide a cloak for the further codified racial segregation of schools in Shelby County.



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Endnotes

1. In 2011, Memphis voters surrendered Memphis City Schools' charter, a decision driven both by funding concerns and by fears that a state legislature with a Republican supermajority could create a special district, thus releasing suburban county residents from the tax burden of funding Memphis schools.
2. The new district included the former Memphis City Schools and schools in unincorporated county areas.
3. Demographic data for all Tennessee school districts and individual schools is available for download from the [Tennessee Department of Education](#). In 2015-16, Germantown, Arlington, and Lakeland had the highest percentages of white students, at 73.68%, 75.01%, and 75.82%, respectively; moreover, only 2% of Germantown Schools students are categorized as economically disadvantaged compared to 59.1% for Shelby County Schools. Millington, at only 44.77% white and the most diverse, is also in a municipality home to a US Naval base.
4. For a history of resegregation in US schools, see Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid School in America* (Broadway Books, 2006). More recently, Nikole Hannah-Jones traces this history in "The Problem We All Live with, Part I," *This American Life*, episode 562, National Public Radio, WBEZ, 31 July 2015.
5. See Richard Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (H. Regnery, 1953) and Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* (U of California P, 1969, p. 23) for background on the concept of "god-terms."
6. When the legislature first passed a law allowing for municipal schools in counties with over 900,000 residents, a state judge rejected the law, because the only county in the state that met this criterion was Shelby County, making the county an exception. The legislature later changed the law to allow all municipalities to form their own schools.
7. The population and demographic data for Bartlett, TN, and Germantown, TN, are taken from a US Census Bureau QuickFacts search and can be found at the following URL: www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4728960,4703440.
8. Except where otherwise noted, the referenced passages below come from this blog post.
9. In attempting to theorize cunning, Don Herzog explains "the cunning will learn to mimic the virtuous. They'll do that whatever the local code suggests about how to identify the virtuous" (84). The rhetoric of small government and neoliberalism mimics the virtuous goals of democracy but veils the racist implications of its policies. See Herzog's *Cunning* (Princeton UP, 2006).
10. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans' Administration (VA) adopted standards from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) that encouraged white home ownership and discouraged racial heterogeneity to protect property value. These practices included physical barriers and restrictive covenants to prevent black home ownership in new suburbs. Minority homebuyers were ineligible for the same loan programs as white buyers under these practices. For more on this history, see Chapter 2, "From Radicalism to 'Respectability': Race, Residence, and Segregationist Strategy," in Kevin Kruse's *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*.



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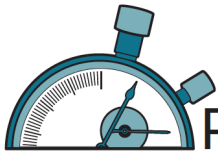
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