

The 1968 New York City School Crisis

Abstract

This paper examines the 1968 New York City school crisis as a watershed moment that fractured the Black-Jewish alliance and revealed the ideological rifts within American liberalism. Set against the backdrop of Ocean Hill-Brownsville—a Brooklyn district marked by economic decline and racial tension—the crisis began with demands by Black and Puerto Rican parents for community control over failing public schools. Supported by Mayor Lindsay and the Ford Foundation, the initiative challenged the authority of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), a predominantly Jewish union that had gained influence through a meritocratic system. At its core, the crisis was a conflict between competing liberal visions: an integrationist Old Left grounded in Jewish universalist humanism, and a separatist New Left animated by Black Power, Afrocentrism, and a critique of white dominance in public education.

The appointment of Rhody McCoy to head the experimental district and the implementation of an Afrocentric curriculum provoked skepticism and resistance from UFT teachers. Tensions erupted after McCoy removed 19 teachers—mostly Jewish—without due process, sparking three successive citywide strikes that shut down public schools and escalated the conflict into a political and cultural firestorm. The resulting scenes of Black students and teachers confronting white educators, the circulation of antisemitic leaflets, and violent rhetoric on both sides contributed to what contemporaries called the most racially polarizing event in New York's history.

The crisis both reflected and accelerated a broader unraveling of postwar liberal coalitions. Jews, once allied with Black causes, increasingly perceived Black separatism and antisemitism as threats to their hard-won inclusion in the American mainstream. Black activists, in turn, saw Jewish resistance to community control as emblematic of white liberal hypocrisy and paternalism. The paper shows how both groups turned inward, embracing ethnic identity politics over cross-racial solidarity. This shift manifested in the rise of neoconservatism among disillusioned Jewish intellectuals, and in the appropriation of Black Power rhetoric to galvanize Jewish assertiveness. Politically, the crisis realigned voting blocs in New York City, ushering in a Jewish-Catholic coalition that favored law and order policies and curbed progressive educational reforms.

The legacy of Ocean Hill-Brownsville is enduring. It revealed deep structural inequities in urban education, the fragility of interracial alliances, and the limits of liberal pluralism when confronted with zero-sum claims to power. The paper contends that while the crisis is often remembered for its explosive racial dynamics, its deeper significance lies in how it unmasked the internal contradictions of American liberalism. Through rich historical documentation and firsthand accounts, the paper illustrates how the 1968 conflict transformed New York's political culture, reshaped American Jewish identity, and prefigured the rise of the identity-based politics that would come to define the late twentieth century.