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Book Reviews

Takeover: Race, Education, and Democracy by Domingo Morel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 206 pp., \$105.00 (cloth).

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At last, after 20 years of states' experimentation with one of the most heavy-handed policy instruments at their disposal—the takeover of local school districts—Dr. Domingo Morel's book *Takeover: Race, Education, and Democracy* has

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answered some of the most pressing questions that researchers and the public have been asking about the political motivations behind, and democratic consequences of, state takeovers. Morel's pioneering analysis contributes several insights into the education, political science, and public policy literature—namely, how states' removal of local control powers alters black and Latino communities' representation on school boards, why black communities are disproportionately affected by takeovers, and whether the publicly stated rationale (low academic performance) represents the true motivation behind this increasingly common, punitive state sanction.

After introducing readers to the political history behind 100-plus takeovers among 33 states, Morel divides his mixed-methods analysis into six chapters. In the second chapter, he presents two takeover case studies: Newark, New Jersey, and Central Falls, Rhode Island. Here, he presents a rich argument for how and why this state intervention has had devastating effects for Newark's black community but somewhat empowering effects for Central Falls's Latino community. In the third chapter, Morel complements his analysis of Newark's experiences by analyzing an original data set of takeovers from 1989 to 2013. Using panel data regression models, he presents compelling evidence of how takeovers affect black and Latino representation on school boards. Chapter 4 gives audiences a historical explanation for why so many Republican-controlled states supported this centralizing policy instrument when Republicans traditionally champion local control and decentralization. The fifth chapter expands the theoretical underpinnings of his analysis, urban regime theory, by introducing two new, helpful concepts: cohesive and disjointed state-local regimes. The final chapter explores state takeovers' implications for communities' of color local control powers in public education.

Evidence as Public Rationale

Rather than attempt to measure the educational outcomes associated with state takeovers, the traditional question posed by policy analysts, Dr. Morel sets his gaze on the political motivations behind state actors' seizure of local control in traditionally disempowered communities. In doing so, the book helps readers interrogate whether the publicly stated rationale behind takeovers—persistently low academic performance—holds up when analyzing the racial makeup of districts that undergo state receivership.

Many observers of state takeovers have asked whether districts with low academic achievement outcomes and high concentrations of black and Latino learners are more vulnerable to state intervention than similarly performing districts with predominantly white populations. Morel's quantitative analyses provide an unambiguous yes to answer this question. He then digs deeper to

uncover rigorous evidence of several racialized patterns not yet documented in the literature. Namely, he shows that as increasing numbers of state finance reform mandates have channeled resources to districts that serve primarily communities of color, states have intervened to stifle the same jurisdictions' autonomy to control their new resources. The analysis undermines the oft-stated public rationales for stake takeovers as responses to persistently low academic performance because it illustrates how these claims don't stand up when one looks systematically at which districts are targeted, which are not, and how state mandates, racial contexts, and black empowerment movements are reliable predictors of where state interventions occur.

Schools for Citizenship and Democratic Governance

Refreshingly, Morel draws linkages between school districts as sites where democracy is practiced and the civic purpose of education, to prepare students as citizens. He does so, in part, by introducing the paradoxical notion of the Conservative Education Logic, a belief system that professes a commitment to improve education and the civic lives of black children but also maintains an investment in the political failures of black communities. Given the history of boards as entry points to empowerment for communities of color, Morel uses this notion to explain how increased minority political representation on city councils can trigger the likelihood of state takeover.

His historical analyses also teach readers how this policy instrument has been consistently leveraged to constrain democracy in black communities as conservatives' response to a so-called "activist federal government," which they viewed as intervening on behalf of black communities at the expense of white ones. Morel persuasively walks readers through an evidence-rich argument, which claims that takeovers restrict democratic governance when states violate communities' rights to locally control public education vis-à-vis school board representation.

Takeover does an excellent job of illustrating the differential impact of this sanction on school board representation. His analysis shows, using multiple forms of evidence, that takeovers have permitted White districts to maintain elected boards; increased Latino representation through state-crafted opportunities to appoint Latinos to boards; and often eliminated boards altogether in predominantly Black districts. Yet Morel doesn't stop at simply ranking the severity of each group's sanctions. He also considers the potential political benefits of changing board compositions post-takeover. Latinos, he finds, ended up actually increasing their disproportionately low board numbers. He posits that takeovers can open up opportunities for the state to assume a role historically taken up by the federal government—remediating racial inequities at the local level (68).

Cory Booker and Racial Politics

Although Morel puts forth a descriptive argument about racial representation by detailing the disparate relationships between black or Latino board representation, at times he seems to assume that representation is tantamount to empowerment. This assumption risks oversimplifying notions of true political empowerment.

In fact, Morel himself complicates this relationship when he presents a sophisticated case study of Cory Booker's mayoral tenure during Newark's state takeover. He depicts a cohesive state-local regime characterized by Mayor Booker's deference to state takeover arrangements and advancement of market-oriented policies, despite the lack of support and even protests by black Newark residents. Through multiple examples, he shows that black representatives may have ideological and political commitments that are not empowering for black communities. The analysis helps readers see how Booker, the first black mayor of Newark elected without the support of the majority of black voters, provides evidence that racial identity is not necessarily a proxy for political commitments.

Expanding Urban Regime Theory

Another contribution of *Takeover* is found in Morel's expansion of urban regime theory (URT) to more thoroughly frame the intergovernmental relations at play in state-municipal relations. Over the last 30 years, URT has become the dominant framework in urban politics since Stone (1989) first conceptualized the role of governmental, civic, and business actors in creating informal arrangements to influence governance. Building on past critiques that have challenged URT for undertheorizing the factors shaping urban governance beyond city boundaries, Morel offers theorists a more robust framework that accounts for how state politicians structure and constrain the ways local actors exercise power. He distinguishes between cohesive state-local regimes, where local communities have strong representation in state affairs, and disjointed state-local regimes, where localities face "hostile" state-led policies (100–101). By comparing New Jersey's gubernatorial behaviors amid each of the two political parties, Morel finds a consistent correlation between Democrats leading cohesive state-local regimes and Republicans leading disjointed state-local regimes. Notably, he explains how Democrat Governor Florio played a key role in the *Abbott v. Burke II* (1990) school finance decision to increase funding for Newark schools while Republican Governor Whitman orchestrated the 1995 takeover of Newark Public

Schools, which abolished the locally elected school board, removed the superintendent, and limited mayoral oversight.

Nonetheless, Morel's more nuanced conceptualization of urban regimes still begs the question, Can "cohesive" state-local regimes work against the interests of the most marginalized communities? Further, how can we interpret those cases in which both cohesive and disjointed state-local regimes support one politically marginalized community at the expense of another?

Complicating Latino and Black Relations

Another strength of Morel's work is his consideration of why Newark's predominantly black community faced the removal of their elected board officials at the same time that Latino representation on the board increased during and after the takeover. Relatedly, he shows how Latinos in Central Falls, New Jersey, embraced takeovers for providing "a vehicle to expand economic opportunity for their community" (54–55). In this way, Morel pushes readers to interrogate why state officials are more likely to intervene in and redistribute power at the local level from white political machines to Latino communities, but not in black-majority cities. Indeed, these are important nuances, but *Takeover's* ethnoracial analyses could have been enhanced had he briefly defined the ethnic and racial boundaries of black and Latino identities, as well as the specific ethnicities of the Latinos in each case. For Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Latinos racialized as black, how did these stakeholders view black elected leaders, and vice versa? In addition to racial and ethnic analyses, considering the role of immigrant status for both communities would have added helpful distinctions.

What about Neoliberalism?

In general, *Takeover* does a good job of contextualizing the trends in state intervention policies amid national and local politics in ways that help readers understand how takeovers emerged as a solution to a particularly framed crisis. Morel skillfully weaves together concepts about federalism, welfare policies, and civil rights movements to present a solid case for why and how these historically contingent factors spurred the federal-urban axis that Republicans sought to disrupt through the "New Federalism," an approach that devolved power to states. However, conspicuously absent from this framing are political theories of neoliberalism, or the political and economic logics that advance the types of market-oriented policies (usually couched in terms of decentralization), that Morel is studying. Although he points to the Conservative Education Logic, he misses

an opportunity to explicitly name the specific ideology and practices that more accurately historicize the “problem” takeover advocates seek to fix. As a result, the book never fully explains, from a political theory point of view, why self-identified progressive leaders of color like Cory Booker still embrace market-oriented policies. State takeovers of districts, and of urban governments more generally, are inextricably linked with beliefs about cures for economic inefficiencies based on business principles and practices.

Of course, if readers choose to read *Takeover* through the theoretical lens of neoliberalism, it will become clear how Morel’s work can be used to extend the scholarship on urban school reform and the politics of education because it delivers a persuasive case of how state-local regimes reduce public oversight and promote private influence in public schools. The book’s account of how Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg donated \$100 million to Newark Public Schools (199, 122) reminds readers that understanding how takeovers transpire requires us to recognize the powerful influence of private actors as more than just a consequence of these reforms. To truly comprehend how the takeover project came to be, observers must also consider the causal role that neoliberal ideology—and its relationship to anti-blackness—justified state intervention in local urban politics in the first place.

Scholars of education, political science, and public policy, as well as elite decision makers and practitioners, are fortunate to have a book like *Takeover* that systematically answers 20 years’ worth of questions about the deeper implications of this increasingly popular policy instrument for democracy, equity, and the local control of public education.

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