TEACHER POWER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Teacher Power in the Digital Age

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Teacher Power in the Digital Age is an examination of the confluence of social, political and communicative forces animating the teachers’ uprising of the last decade: beginning with the accession of a militant slate to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in 2011 and continuing with the nationwide uprising of 2018-19. During this time, thousands of teachers have protested, petitioned, gone on strike, walked out and engaged in sickouts in dozens of states and jurisdictions throughout the country, thus ending a period of decades of relative inactivity on the part of teachers as a political organizing force. The core issues driving teachers to action have ranged from: stagnant wages, inadequate education funding, school closures in disadvantaged communities, loss of autonomy at the hands of federal mandates tying school funding to standardized testing, and the funneling of resources away from traditional public schools to charter schools and other so-called “choice schools.”

Existing scholarship on this movement has generally focused on its organizational capacities and its broader consequences for labor relations. Ashby and Bruno, Uetricht, Brogan, Blanc have all done exemplary work in this regard. This dissertation departs from that literature by situating the movement, instead, within the broader “movements of
the squares” - including the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, the Indignados and
the Arab Spring – due to the fact that all of these uprisings took shape on social media
and were born of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism. These movements have
directed their ire at growing social and economic inequalities, the increasingly
authoritarian nature of governance and the inadequacies of existing organs of
representative democracy. Not only have these movements posed themselves against
what they view to be a rapacious power elite, but also against democratic institutions that
they see as being compromised by neoliberal logics.

My argument is that the same mistrust has been present within the teachers’
movement, as participants have often expressed frustration with the inadequacy of their
union leadership in confronting the neoliberal reforms promulgated over the past few
decades. They saw their movement, in part, as a mechanism by which they could push
their unions to heightened militancy. In this sense, I contend that it was an “outside-
inside” movement, in which activists fought both outside and within their representative
body. Nonetheless, I also argue that the existing union infrastructure has served as a vital
institutional anchor which has served to evade the problem of ephemerality that has
plagued other movements in this wave of contestation.

In sum, the power of teacher activists stems from the unique combination of old
institutional forms and new digital mechanisms of resistance used in tandem. The
institutional support of the union coupled with the networking affordances of digital
communication technologies have allowed teacher activists to engage an organizational
and communicative intervention that have forced their unions to be more responsive
around the unique sets of issues facing teachers and education in the neoliberal epoch. At
the same time, the focus on communication and messaging – rather than narrowly focusing on bargaining around contractual issues – has empowered teachers to combat the dominant discourses promulgated by the nation’s elite on teachers and education. Specifically, neoliberal reformers have tended to use demonizing rhetoric about the dysfunction plaguing public schools to initiate a set of reforms that narrowly fault teachers for poor student performance (rather than larger social issues). By organizing social movements with the broader communities impacted by these policies, teachers have been able to shift these discourses in a more favorable direction.
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Firstly, I would like to thank all of the teacher activists for generously providing their time to serve as interview participants and for granting access to the social media groups that would ultimately serve as the basis for my empirical investigations. Their generosity made this project possible, as did their commitment to a public school system that genuinely serves the communities that schools are embedded in.

I would especially like to acknowledge the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) activists whose work has inspired thousands of other teacher activists throughout the country. I was in Chicago when the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators was just a small group of teachers frustrated with the direction of their union and the state of education more generally. I never would have imagined that they would ever realize the monumental achievements seen in Chicago and elsewhere.

I would also like to recognize my mother, Carol Reichel – a long-time CTU delegate – who imbued me with the same public service ethos animating this teachers’ movement. Some of my earliest memories are of me being brought along to union meetings and other political gatherings, which set an example in me for the often tedious and painstaking and work that goes into maintaining a healthy democracy.

Lastly, I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Todd Wolfson, Regina Marchi, Deepa Kumar and James Compton. I have been unbelievably lucky to have three union leaders providing their unique expertise and insight in guiding me through this project. Todd, my advisor, has proven especially patient and resilient in overseeing this research while also serving as the faculty union president during a time where that role was particularly challenging because of the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The
fact that he continued to serve as my advisor despite this timeline running into his sabbatical speaks volumes. For that, I am immensely appreciative.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Karen Lewis, whose service and leadership in the Chicago Teachers’ Union inspired thousands to join the battle for the soul of public education.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Uprising in the Heartland

Kevin Presnell, a high school civics teacher at Madison Central high school in Richmond, Kentucky, and local building rep for Kentucky Education Association (KEA), echoed a sentiment that I heard numerous times in my preliminary discussions with teachers involved in the uprising in the state earlier this year. That is: despite his involvement with the KEA, he never considered himself an activist prior to this. He identifies as a Republican, and lives in one of the reddest parts of a state that has sided with the Republican presidential nominee in eight of the last 10 elections.

However, a veritable fuse was lit as the state legislature debated an overhaul of teacher’s pensions. The changes would have limited the number of sick days that could be cashed in, while placing new hires in a hybrid system wherein eventual payouts would be unknown prior to the time of retirement. As activist teachers began clamoring against the reforms, organizing several walkouts and marches on the state capitol, Governor Matt Bevin scolded them for having the temerity to cancel classes, declaring: “I guarantee you somewhere in Kentucky today a child was sexually assaulted that was left at home because there was nobody there to watch them.”

These remarks spurred thousands more out into the streets in subsequent rallies. Even those who never previously identified as a political activist joined the fray, as the movement was less rooted in issues bridging traditional political fault lines, and more about defending the integrity of their profession from attacks by political leaders. Presnell notes: “This movement was instigated by the governor, and emboldened by West Virginia,” referring to the wildcat strike in the state bordering Kentucky to the east.
Moreover, the legislative chicanery around the pension reforms, introduced at the 11th hour in a sewerage bill, felt particularly dehumanizing to a workforce that has already endured decades of austerity. Many took this gambit as symbolic of how teaching had been devalued as a profession. Maggie Roll, a ninth-year Spanish high school teacher in Hazard, KY, pondered: “How will we recruit the best teachers when we are on the same level as the sewage?” This feeling of disrespect that Roll describes has been the principal driving force of the teacher uprising over the last decade: in disparate locales from Arizona to Chicago to the rolling hills of Eastern Kentucky that Roll and Presnell inhabit.

The central issue was not one of teacher pay in most of the places that saw teacher walkouts in 2018. Despite much of the news coverage of the movement focusing on teacher pay – and the more hostile framing thereof portraying teachers as selfishly pursuing their own interests at the expense of students – the reality is that grievances aired during the strike tended to focus on issues around education funding and governance (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Blanc, 2019). The core issue, instead, is one of control of the education process. Teachers increasingly feel that they have been stripped of their professional autonomy in the face of neoliberal reforms that have sought to achieve efficiency standards akin to the neo-Taylorist principles promulgated elsewhere in the neoliberal economy. For example, Kumar (2007) charts how these forces animated the United Parcel Service (UPS) strike of 2006 in response to a similar set of changes to the work environment, including the deskilling of the hourly workforce and the implementation of team-led management by which the social pressure of shop-floor surveillance was used to manage individual workers.
These processes of rationalization and deskilling have been effected in education in four interrelated ways: tightening public education budgets with a particular focus on subjects deemed non-essential, such as the arts and foreign languages; increasing the number of standardized tests and other forms of state-mandated curricula, thus stripping teachers of autonomy; tying education funding and teaching promotions more narrowly to the results of standardized tests; closing schools deemed “failing” by standardized test metrics and privileging so-called “choice schools,” such as charter and voucher schools in their stead, because these schools more closely align with the market logics privileged by the overarching reform process (Goldstein, D., 2014; Lipman, 2011).

This thesis contends that the net effect of these reforms has been twofold: the promulgation and naturalization of what I term a “neoliberal pedagogy” rooted in metric-driven logics of rationalization and control, on the one hand, and the resultant alienation of large parts of the teaching corps, on the other hand. Moreover, I hold that this twofold process is reflective of a larger social phenomenon, wherein the naturalization of neoliberal logics in the cultural arena has bred resentment that has seen the rise of counter-hegemonic movements on that very terrain. Most notably, this process has played out in the terrain of the “digital citizen,” who is subjected to neoliberal logics animating the architecture of digital communication platforms, while often using that very architecture for the purpose of counter-hegemonic protest.

It is for this reason that I situate the teachers’ movement among the larger wave of digitally enabled protest movements of the last two decades, including the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the Indignados movement in Spain, as well as the Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter in the United States. I adopt Gerbaudo’s (2012)
terminology – “movements of the squares” – in categorizing these movements, while capturing the importance of these movements meeting in public squares as a “material precipitation from symbolic assemblages to bodily assemblages in public space” (p. 42). Also, like Gerbaudo, I hold that these movements are all born of the ongoing crisis of neoliberal hegemony. This dissertation takes it as a given that neoliberalism - as a set of principles seeking to use government to best harness market logics, often to the detriment of public and social infrastructure, including public education – has come into a crisis of reproduction. Over much of the last decade, the signs of crisis are abundant: not only in the emergence of these movements amid the heightened precariousness experienced by large swathes of the population, but also in the weakening of the political center line and the rise of once dormant tendencies on both on the left and right, from the socialism of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jeremy Corbyn to the neo-nationalist reaction of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Modi and Duterte.

Moreover, I hold that the presence of this crisis has resulted in the principal political fault line to demarcate between the neoliberal consensus and the various counterhegemonic moments contesting the primacy of neoliberal logics. This political battle is undergirded by a discursive tension between the rationalization of market logics intrinsic to neoliberalism and an amorphous “other” seeking to recenter the collective/community in the political imaginary. This project seeks to glimpse this tension within the educational realm, through an investigation of the discourses circling around the teachers’ movement, guided by the following questions:
1. How is this movement similar to other movements of the era, most notably the “movements of the squares” that have emerged out of the resentment of an increasingly precarious population in countries throughout the world?

2. Why has the teachers’ movement become so integral to the contestation of neoliberalism in its moment of crisis? What does this say, more broadly, about the importance of teachers and education in the ongoing struggle?

3. What are the dominant discourses in both the mass media and political terrain about education and teachers, generally, and the teachers’ movement, in particular, and how do these reflect governing neoliberal logics?

4. How do these discourses differ from the way that teachers themselves talk about their work, both in interviews and in their organizing on social media?

5. How has this discursive tension illuminated the broader crisis of social reproduction facing neoliberal logics?

6. As this crisis continues to deepen, what can be learned from the teachers’ movement – and other “movements of the squares” – as a new hegemonic consensus is constituted?

Digitally-Enabled Protest in the Crisis of Neoliberalism
For the purposes of this research, it is important to note that, like the other “movements of the squares,” the teachers’ uprising has largely taken shape online. Social media platforms have provided the technological affordances permitting the “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) through which teachers with similar grievances have been able to find one another and organize around a common purpose. This is different than saying the movements were born in these digital arenas. The origins of the movement go back decades, to be sure. Teachers have long been frustrated with the direction of education policy and practice in this country, and there were many groups of varying degrees of formality clamoring for some form of resistance to the reforms being promulgated. Similarly, the Occupy movement’s origins are traceable to the “global social justice movement” of the late 90s and early 2000’s, in addition to the general state of rising frustration and resentment on the part of young people facing ever more precarious realities. Nonetheless, the networking affordances of these platforms have allowed for full-blown movements to emerge out of the foundations that were laid years prior.

As such, I contend that one cannot understand the teachers’ movement without also understanding the unique interplay between digitization and neoliberalism that has characterized the early part of the 21st century. While these two forces have different origins, they are related due to their historical positioning during the same epoch: a time when finance capital has risen to become dominant, and its logics – including the privileging of financial flows over social good and the romanticization of individual initiative over collective endeavors– have become hegemonic. These forces have resulted in heightening alienation of a public that has become ever less connected to civic and
political organizations, which formerly served as the primary vehicle of resistance (Putnam, 2000). Within this context, the networking affordances of social media have helped fill that void, creating a release valve through which grievances can be raised and collectives of resistance formed.

This “digital citizenry” is unmoored from traditional civic and political organizations but networked via metric-driven digital logics that mirror larger neoliberal logics. In recent years, various scholars have written about how the major technology platforms – including Facebook and Google – monetize users’ personal data by selling the behavioral data that results to advertisers: a system that McChesney and Foster (2014) and Zuboff (2019) separately call “surveillance capitalism.” I prefer to conceive of these surveillance mechanisms as a natural extension of neoliberalism’s internal logics rather than as a new mode of capitalist production. In this formulation, I view neoliberalism’s central thrust as the subsumption of public space by metric-driven market logics: a set of processes that has been glimpsed both in the digital and educational domains.

I hold that the objective of neoliberal governance is to use these metrics as disciplinary mechanisms of control. In this regard, I embrace Olssen’s (1999) characterization of the subjectivity emergent in the neoliberal epoch, in terms of a shift from a rational “self-interested” individual to a “manipulatable man” that is harnessed by a regime of governance:

In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism . . . there is a . . . change in subject position from 'homo economicus', who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive'. It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of 'neo-liberalism', but that in an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, 'performance appraisal' and
of forms of control generally. In this model the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark. The state will see to it that each one makes a 'continual enterprise of ourselves’ ... in what seems to be a process of 'governing without governing' (p. 340).

While the subject in classical liberalism is rational, the neoliberal subject is rationalized by metric-driven regimes of valuation. Meanwhile, the “contradiction” that emerges in this domain of the digital citizenry is defined by the fact that the monetization of user activity is reliant on networking that can be used to organize movements of resistance. In short, the “digital citizen” is one controlled by neoliberal valuation schemes, but that is, nonetheless, capable of connecting around common grievances using the networking pathways that are otherwise the raw material of the digital platform companies’ profit.

For teachers, the contradictory process plays out on two separate planes: that of the digital citizenry just described and, secondly, that of practitioners of the dominant pedagogical practices of the era. In the latter case, I contend that successive reforms passed at all levels of government, largely urged along by two major pieces of national-level legislation in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), during the second Bush administration, and Race to the Top (RTTP), during the Obama administration, have effectively concretized a metric-driven “neoliberal pedagogy” based on standardized test results. In other words, teachers are subjected to neoliberal logics in their working life in the same way that that the digital citizen is in their networked social life.

In sum, the teachers’ movement sits at the intersection of neoliberalism’s rationalization in both the techno-social and educational domains. I contend that the latter is especially significant, as it places educators at a critical chokepoint in the system of
circulation of neoliberal logics, given the fact that the educational apparatus is vital to the legitimation and reproduction of ruling logics. The educational realm is arguably even more central to this process than the terrain of media, because of the sheer amount of time that pupils spend at school during their formative years (Althusser, 1971; Gitlin, 2003). As such, these battles over the form and function of education are exceedingly important in terms of understanding the circulation of dominant discourses in society and their relation to prevailing power structures.

The contentious subject emerging out of this wave of contestation is described by social movement scholars in a number of different ways. Hardt and Negri (2004) employ the term “multitude” to describe a distributed network of activists linked in struggle despite their disparate nature, spread across different geographic locations, workplaces and advocacy organizations. They liken the multitude to a swarm, acting in concert without any central authority guiding the movement: a formation that they embrace. Meanwhile, Wolfson (2014), in describing what he terms the “cyber left,” views this lack of central authority as a serious flaw in contemporary organizing. Because activists have tended to idealize the network model of the platforms from which they took shape, they have eschewed hierarchies in their group formations. Wolfson contends that this brand of “prefigurative politics” lacks the organizational structure with which to sustain political pressure and realize meaningful gains: an argument rendered ever more compelling by the fact that the subject of his study – “Indymedia” – has ceased to exist.

I endorse the latter’s critique of this radical horizontality. While I believe that Hardt and Negri’s characterization of the nature and form of contentious politics in the contemporary age is accurate, their embrace of radical decentralization is highly
problematic. Gerbaudo (2017) discusses this issue in terms of the broader neo-anarchistic ethos coursing through these movements:

Neo-anarchism has provided a response to the perceived detachment between everyday life and institutional politics, and catered to the new desire for individual self-determination emerging in a complex and highly diversified post-industrial society. However, the implications of neo-anarchism have sometimes been problematic because of its warped reflection of the individualism of neoliberal ideology. Similarly to neoliberalism, neo-anarchism has tended to value freedom and spontaneity against all forms of institutionalization and formalization, perceived to be inauthentic and alienating. This inadvertent complicity between neo-anarchism and neoliberalism built upon their shared individualism and anti-statism, has appeared particularly problematic in the aftermath of the Great Recession. (pp.67-68).

The tendency toward this radical horizontality is rooted to a large degree in activist mistrust of existing democratic and representative bodies that they see as being compromised by neoliberal logics (Gerbaudo, 2017). These movements have shared a common theme of resentment over a perceived loss of power and autonomy by citizens in the face of neoliberal governance that has increasingly insulated economic decision-making from public purview.

Teachers have not been immune to this frustration, as many teachers have expressed displeasure with the complacency of their union organizations in the face of decades of these neoliberal reforms. However, most of these criticisms were tempered by an appreciation for the fact that the unions, as a whole, have provided the necessary material and institutional support to allow these movements to sustain beyond the initial protest actions. Compared to those prior movements in this wave of contestation, the teachers have benefitted from greater stability stemming from their connection to institutional anchors, including the communities that schools are embedded in, as well as
the union infrastructure that was so vital to sustaining and providing material support for this movement.

Rather than a wholesale rejection of formal structures, I contend that teacher activists have instead initiated a shift toward social movement union organizing, through which formal union channels are supplemented with grassroots community organizing (both online and offline). This shift has been most pronounced in Chicago, where the militant Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) slate is now a decade into its leadership of the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU). After years of relative passivity on the part of the prior union leadership there, CORE acceded to the helm of the union in 2010 on the heels of a grassroots campaign by union activists connecting teachers and community members in struggle to contest slated closures of dozens of schools deemed “failing,” as well as the larger suite of neoliberal reforms that mandated these closures (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Brogan, 2013, 2014; Uetricht, 2014). Recognizing that these issues went beyond the bounds of traditional bread and butter union issues – e.g. teacher pay and pensions – and instead impacted the broader communities around the schools, activists began cultivating alliances with parents, students and concerned citizens in those communities (Brogan; etc).

In Chapter 5, I argue that this tactical and organization shift was necessitated not only by the scope of the issues being faced in the educational domain, but also because prior union leadership had become increasingly complacent in recent years. Moreover, recent reforms passed in Illinois (as well as most other states) placed severe restrictions on the issues that could be addressed in the formal collective bargaining process. Teachers were legally barred from raising issues outside of compensation and other
contractual concerns. The broader social movement they built outside of these formal union channels – through community groups like the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) - permitted them to inject these issues into the public discourse as a mechanism of circumventing this formal legal blockage. I further contend that this model of organizing was effectively replicated in the 2018-19 uprising, as teachers in the various states involved in that wave also pushed demands outside of formal union channels: a necessity because teachers were prohibited from using the strike as a mechanism of resistance in those “red states.”

In short, this movement has embraced a hybrid model engaging both old and new organizing forms: traditional union bargaining organizing as well as the digitally-enabled mechanisms of resistance that have become prominent in recent years. Moreover, I hold that this model is a particularly instructive one for activists, given that it managed to circumvent the limitations posed by the business unionism model that has been dominant in the neoliberal epoch, while also evading the problem of ephemerality that has plagued other digitally-enabled movements.

**Discursive And Pedagogical Interventions**

I hold that this combination of networked sociality and institutional grounding has allowed the teachers’ movement to not only realize significant contractual victories, but also to function as an important discursive intervention into how society perceives the role of education in society. I further argue that this intervention is important because of the centrality of education in the process of legitimating the existing hegemonic
consensus. As a central cultural institution, education policy plays a vital role in terms of how the existing social totality is conceived and rationalized.

To develop this analysis, I draw on a reservoir of work connecting the neoliberal ideological project to the education reforms that animate the current struggle (Apple, 2001, 2006, 2013; Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Lipman, 2011), as well as literature on news media framing as both justifying and naturalizing the reforms comporting with the neoliberal counteroffensive of this era and use this literature to inform the empirical analysis of news reportage of the movement (Apple 2001, 2013; Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Goldstein, D., 2014; Goldstein, R., 2011; Lipman, 2011). This project connects these strands by showing how educational discourses and dominant pedagogies have served to help legitimate the prevailing hegemonic order, while producing the contradictions that are now proving to be its undoing.

My contention is that the teacher movement constitutes a counter-hegemonic pedagogy challenging a neoliberal paradigm in its educational manifestation. While the neoliberal view of education is narrowly focused on the cultivation of good workers for capital, the counter-hegemonic of pedagogical practice views education as a public good in which schools perform a vital public service: that of serving as an important anchor in the communities they are embedded in, while cultivating the engaged citizenry necessary for a robust democracy. The neoliberal pedagogy sees low-scoring schools (on standardized tests) as expendable, while activist teachers embracing a counter-hegemonic pedagogy sees schools as vital anchors of the community. This tension has been particularly stark in Chicago, where the CTU has focused much of its attention on organizing in communities targeted for school closures in recent years (Brogan, 2014;
Lipman, 2011). Likewise, a neoliberal pedagogy views teachers as data points marking how well their students perform on these same tests, while the counterhegemonic view of the teachers’ movement demands the respect that should be afforded a vital public servant.

Central Arguments

In sum, the core arguments animating this research are as follows:

1. Firstly, I situate the teachers’ movement among the broader “movements of the squares” wave of protest – including the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, Black lives Matter, and the Indignados - which have in common the fact that they largely took shape on social media and that they are born of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism.

2. However, the teachers’ movement is unique in that it has taken on a hybrid form – combining old union architecture with digitally-enabled communicative interventions. In this regard, it sits at the intersection of neoliberalism’s rationalization in both the techno-social and educational terrain. It shares much in common with the uprisings of “digital citizens” within this broader wave of contestation but is also tied to older institutional forms.

3. As a result, the teachers’ movement has managed to evade the problem of ephemerality plaguing other “movements of the squares.”
4. In engaging with a broader public of affected parties, including parents and community members around schools – both online and offline – the teachers’ movement has marked the beginnings of a broader sectoral shift toward social movement unionism, particularly in Chicago, where the militant CORE slate has now presided over the CTU for a decade.

5. This shift has involved interrelated organizational and communicative interventions on the part of teachers through which they have incorporated broader publics into their organizing efforts, as part of an effort to contest the hegemonic neoliberal consensus in terms of official education policy and the broader discourses that legitimate it.

6. As such, the teachers’ movement constitutes a discursive and pedagogical intervention against the metric-driven neoliberal logics that have been effectively codified into law via successive reforms promulgated at all levels of government.

7. In this regard, much of the ongoing struggle is about meaning: specifically, how society conceives of the role of education in society. I contend that neoliberal reforms have served to heighten the tension between a “public service” view of education versus one that sees education as an economic instrumentality. The discursive intervention of teachers is to, effectively, push the prevailing discourse in the direction of the former.
Dissertation Organization

The remainder of Part 1 of this dissertation lays out the historical context and theoretical framework that are used as the analytical vehicle for the ensuing empirical investigation. Chapter 2 elaborates further on the nature of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism discussed in this introduction by providing a brief history of the social and economic forces that gave rise to neoliberalism as an ideology, while delineating the contradictions that are animating its current crisis.

In expounding this theory, I argue that it is the interplay between the recurrent cyclical crises of capitalism and the unique features of digital capitalism that animate the contradictions giving rise to the current wave of social movement activity. I further hold that the current historical moment is characterized by a dual crisis of neoliberal capitalism and American hegemony, which have manifested in rising levels of mistrust on the part of large portions of the populace. Meanwhile, this mistrust – together with the resentment that it has bred – has found a home in the digital pathways of social media, which has been home to all manner of counterhegemonic thought: much in the realm of “conspiracy theory,” but much also in the realm of legitimate social movements, including this teacher uprising.

Chapter 3 advances a heuristic model to chart the flow of educational discourses across societal circuits. In so doing, it provides a history of recent education reforms, the political rhetoric that has motivated them, and the role of the news media and popular culture in legitimating these reforms and their disciplinary functions. This history begins with the Reagan administration’s employment of rhetoric about a “crisis in education” to explain the flagging economy and the fact that the United States was then losing ground
to countries like Germany and Japan in terms of competitive dynamism in automotive and computer technology. In essence, an economic crisis was discursively displaced to the educational realm, with teachers being blamed for the country’s waning competitive edge, which, in turn, legitimated the enactment of myriad reforms to hold teachers accountable for the performance of their students.

This chapter contends that the “crisis of education” rhetoric drew on pre-existing popular culture tropes and media frames about ineffectual, lazy teachers. In making this argument, I distill previous studies inspecting dozens of major television shows and motion pictures in which teachers are portrayed as hopelessly inept and students as aimless and unruly. The educational sector as a whole is, in turn, depicted as needing an outside savior to rescue it from this dysfunction. As momentum grew for education “reforms,” these discourses translated into policy that effectively introduced new regimes of discipline in education, both by attacking teacher pay and benefits and by tying teacher evaluation more closely to student performance on standardized tests (and similar metrics).

In Chapter 4, I highlight the class and gender dynamic of education and teaching work. In so doing, I build off of work from radical feminists, especially those operating in the autonomist Marxist tradition, to frame the history of education reforms in terms of the larger struggle between productive and reproductive labor. The latter, which has generally been feminized, has also tended to be un- and under-compensated, owing to patriarchal structures that devalue work occurring outside of the so-called “formal economy.” In terms of class, this chapter notes that teachers reside at a contradictory class position in society between the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. However, in
lean times, this position veers more in the direction of the latter as teachers tend to be singled out for the types of reforms seen over the last 40 years, reflective of the power asymmetry in which reproductive work is held in lower esteem than productive work.

Part 2 of the dissertation takes an empirical turn in looking at what motivated teachers to action, how they used digital communication technologies in their organizing, and how major print news media has covered the protests. Chapter 5 starts by telling the story of the teacher’s view of the uprising. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with 25 teachers from the four states involved in the 2018 uprising, in addition to members of the Chicago Teachers’ Union, I discuss what motivated individual teachers to participate in the movement, what issues they saw as most important, and what role digital media played in their organizing efforts.

In distilling these interviews, I identify and elaborate on three dominant themes. Firstly, this movement was largely organic in nature, rather than being driven by a top-down social movement organization, though activists did draw on and benefit from previously existing organizational resources. Secondly, the principal factor motivating teachers to action was a sense of being disrespected by their political leaders: that they were unfairly singled out for neoliberal austerity. Thirdly, Facebook was vital to the formation of the movement, and, specifically, the establishment of a common sense of purpose by which unity was forged in the constitution of the movement. The latter finding foreshadows the separate study on social media use carried out in Chapter 6.

This chapter also fleshes out the central argument about the new model of teachers’ unionism emerging out of this movement. I hold that teacher activists engaged both a communicative and organizational intervention into existing union structures to
address shortcomings with those structures, specifically as they pertain to the lack of engagement with the larger communities impacted by educational policy. In this respect, teacher activists have moved their unions into more of a “social movement union” direction wherein broader social issues are addressed through a larger coalition of affected parties.

Chapter 6 examines Facebook usage by the teachers’ movement of 2018 – the “red state rebellion” – and develops a typology for understanding the purpose motivating that usage. Building on other scholarship inspecting social media use by social movements, I shift the focus from the affective nature of online discourse to the purpose of that discourse. In looking at the ways that social media was used in protest uprising, I argue that social media allows members with similar grievances to connect through use of common political action frames, and then facilitates the process of motivating and mobilizing other members based on these common grievances.

In my empirical study, I select posts with a minimum of twenty engagements (likes, shares and comments), and evaluate these based on purpose. I start with specific descriptions of the nature of each post before then locating four broader categories of purpose: narration/ articulation of the cause, mobilization of interested parties, motivation of the already mobilized, and discussion/information sharing.

I argue that that social movement leaders could benefit from thinking tactically about how their various movements could apply these affordances to their respective movements, rather than thinking in broad terms about using social media as a promotional tool. In other words, the chapter holds that there are very specific uses to be made of Facebook that can be very beneficial to a nascent organization, but that can also
be problematic as the organization matures and needs a firmer foundation: something that the teachers had in the form of their already existing union structure.

Chapter 7 examines print news coverage of the teachers’ movements from both the CTU strike of 2012 and the rolling uprising in 2018, focusing on discursive currents embedded in the dominant frames thereof. In so doing, it inspects how teachers and education are viewed in relation to problems existent in other sectors of society. The questions animating this analysis are as follows: Are teachers disproportionately blamed for economic problems and other social issues in print coverage? To what extent does the coverage cast a disciplinary tone in its treatment of teachers? What ideological tendencies are glimpsed in the coverage, and how do they reflect the breadth of elite reaction to the movement? In what ways do these ideological tendencies demonstrate a divide among cultural institutions - education and the news media in particular- indicative of a broader hegemonic rupture?

In fleshing out the dominant news frames and their embedded discourses, I select news and editorial pieces from the four major national newspapers – the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and USA Today – for the six-month period surrounding the protest activity in both 2012 and 2018. I then devise an inductive coding scheme to identify prevalent frames in the reportage. I start by characterizing coverage as positive, neutral or negative before subsequently identifying themes that resulted in this characterization. Upon identifying dominant themes, I then reduce these to four frames based on code words or tone present in the article.

In the end, I find there to be more prevalence of sympathetic, liberal frames in the coverage of the 2018 strike wave. Nonetheless, I argue that this shift did not effectively
break with the neoliberal paradigm. The dominant discursive current remained trapped within the bounds set by the question of whether or not teachers are to blame for larger societal ills. While the more liberal rendering rejects the notion that teachers are the source of the broader social malaise found in communities around “failing” schools, it does not locate the source of these problems in broader systems of exploitation and marginalization baked into unregulated capitalist social organization.

Finally, the conclusion of Teacher Power in the Digital Age revisits the heuristic model introduced in Chapter 3 charting discursive flows through communicative circuits and characterizes this journey as one that has gone from a “politics and pedagogy of dispossessed” to a “movement of the dispossessed.” I then argue that this teacher intervention into the dominant pedagogies and discourses on education demonstrates the important role that they play in the constitution of a hegemonic consensus. As such, I suggest some modifications to Althusser’s notion of education as constituting an “ideological state apparatus” (in re-engaging with theory that I introduce in that same chapter).

I argue that teachers are not passive servants operating within a cultural apparatus that strictly functions to mold similarly passive subjects. Instead, it is best to conceive of any of the cultural apparatuses as being subjected to negotiation between different actors that exist in that domain, including workers and practitioners of the associated cultural activity (be it journalists in the realm of news media or teachers in the educational realm). In this respect, I suggest a synthesis of Althusser and Gramsci. Any hegemonic consensus is achieved through deliberative processes operating in all of the major cultural domains. While dominant forces have an advantage in terms of structuring each cultural domain
and setting the discursive agenda within it, the agency held by cultural practitioners –
teachers, in particular – allows for substantial avenues of resistance. Moreover, when
pupils are subjected to the education process, they are not strictly exposed to the
dominant ideology. They are also exposed to educational practitioners and other workers
and members of the school community, none of which are simply purveyors of ruling
logics. Students are instead witness to a complex process of synthesis between dominant
and subordinate groups: a microcosm of processes playing out elsewhere in society. In
this respect, the story of teachers and education effectively tells a bigger story about the
social and political dynamics occurring in society writ large. In this case, one can glimpse
the story of neoliberalism and its discontents in what former CTU president – the late
Karen Lewis – has referred to as “the battle for the soul of education.”
Chapter 2: Teachers in the Clutches of Neoliberalism

The Rise of the Neoliberal Subject

This chapter expands on the discussion from the introduction about the nature of the capitalist crisis animating current social realities: notably, the tensions and divisions that have characterized political systems throughout the world, the rise of right-wing neo-nationalist extremism of the Trump/ Duterte/ Bolsonaro/ Modi brand and the concomitant resurgence of a socialist left in places like the United States and the United Kingdom, where such tendencies have long been dormant. As Wallerstein (2011) notes, the current era is a bifurcated one, wherein both the left and right have fractured, reflective of a more fundamental division between those that remain committed to the logics of neoliberal governance and those that are counterposed against it.

In this chapter, I locate the current historical juncture of crisis and rupture within a longer cycle of capitalist crises and provide a deeper sense of historical context for the of the teachers’ movement while highlighting its structural embeddedness. In this respect, I recognize that what is going on in the educational domain is tightly wound up with what is going on in society writ large. By extension, teachers’ movements are naturally part of broader struggles at any given historical juncture.

In the course of delineating this history and structural analysis, I also elaborate on the emergence of a neoliberal subject – rooted in the conditions and experience of neoliberal society – that is emblematic of the lived reality of teachers during this epoch. She is subjected to routine monitoring and evaluation as part of a neoliberalism’s disciplinary functions, which have manifested in workplaces throughout the world
As such, I argue that teachers are in a privileged position to contest the prevailing social and economic organization of the current historical epoch owing to their existence at the locus of society’s evaluative and monitorial mechanisms. As they are evaluators that are, in turn, evaluated by the disciplinary logics of neoliberalism – manifested in urban policy reforms singling them out as the cause of failing schools and uncompetitive economies – they sit at a privileged point at the center of neoliberalism’s contradictions.

In order for the disciplinary regime at the heart of neoliberal logics to function, teachers must dutifully execute it. However, given that they are also subjected to it in ways that have undermined their professional autonomy and human dignity, they have increasingly come resentful about their central role in this arrangement. I contend that it is this core contradiction that explains the prevalence of teachers’ movements in the era of neoliberalism’s reproductive crisis.

Central Assumptions

There are three core assumptions underpinning this central argument. The first assumption is that economic cycles are natural parts of capitalist dynamics, defined by one dominant accumulation regime coming into crisis and subsequently being replaced by a new one that responds to the problems underpinning the crisis that emerged. In this respect, much of this chapter is about the functions of social crises: how they develop and how governing structures reestablish stability through policy and discursive interventions.
The second assumption rooting this chapter’s analysis is that current social
dynamics are largely defined by the most recent notable transition— in the 1970s –from a
Fordist to a neoliberal regime of accumulation (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2005;
McNally, 2011)While there is broad agreement among scholars that neoliberalism has
now come into crisis, it is unclear whether a new regime of accumulation has taken its
place, though some might point to “surveillance capitalism” (McChesney & Foster, 2014;
Zuboff, 2019) or “techno-feudalism” (Varoufakis) as having supplanted neoliberalism (or
complementing it on the plane of the digital economy). Nonetheless, there is broad
agreement on the shift from Fordism to neoliberalism as being one of the dominant
features of the latter half of the 20th century, characterized by a set of policies undertaken
by the leading global economies to address the profit slump encountered in the 1970s
crisis of stagflation. These policies include the mass privatization of public infrastructure,
suppression of wages, wholesale attacks on unions and the “globalization” of production
and supply chains in order to exploit cheaper costs in other parts of the world.
Meanwhile, shop floor management moved from Taylorism to what Moody characterizes
as “lean production,” which includes the intensification of work processes and the
transfer of management duties to monitorial teams (Apple, 1996; Harvey, 2005; Hardt &
Negri, 2000; Kumar, 2007; McNally, 2011). In summing up the various ways that
neoliberalism functions as ideology, policy and zeitgeist, Lipman (2011) defines the term
as such:

Neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of
governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest,
unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp
retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social
goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the
premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient (6).
It should also be made clear that this definition does not suggest that neoliberalism is all-encompassing. As Peck (2013) notes, neoliberalism is not a totality in and of itself, but, conversely, “can only be found amongst its others, in a state of messy co-existence” (139). In any society, there will be a number of power sources and embedded social schemas. Moreover, in shifting across historical periods, the world is not invented anew. Old practices are refashioned in novel ways with different ends in mind. The example with shop-floor organization is quite telling. While the advent of neoliberalism is often characterized as involving a shift from Taylorism to “lean production,” i.e. team-based organization, the reality is that control is more localized and intense, what Parker and Slaughter (1988) characterize as “management by stress.” Rather than workers being monitored at specific checkpoints, the monitorial functions are spread throughout the shopfloor, or, in the case of education, the monitoring take the form of constant interventions into pedagogy, such as through

My third assumption - drawing on the autonomist Marxist tradition – is that there is a concomitant social shift of the dominant subjectivity in response to the emergence of a new regime of accumulation (Hardt & Negri). In a deliberative process that plays out in the cultural and political arenas, the elite respond to demands posed from below and restructure institutions to respond to those demands while reformulating the mechanisms of exploitation accordingly. In essence, the subject of the prior economic regime breaks free of the associated strictures, only to be reshaped by the strictures of the new dominant logics. The principal restraint of Fordism related to the limitations on geographic movement: the Fordist subject being sequestered in sites of industrial production, their
ability to bargain limited by the collective power held in withholding labor power within that production site (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Meanwhile, the neoliberal subject is let loose from the work site and, instead, subjected to a regime of discipline throughout society: what the autonomists refer to as the “social factory” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). What is made to look like flexibility and autonomy in the workplace – with control shifted from centralized management to teams on the shop floor – is actually a mechanism of heightened control and surveillance, what Parker and Slaughter (1988) call “management by stress.” Kumar (2007) relates: “Lean production strips workers’ control over the shop floor . . . It uses as few materials as possible, and workers must work as fast as they can to make up for their inadequate numbers. Peer pressure is enormous, because if one worker slows or stops the production process, all the other workers are adversely affected” (27).

In this shift to collective surveillance as a mechanism of control, the neoliberal subject is made to blame herself for her failure to live up to the “standard of self-sufficiency” (Swales et al, 2020). This shift in subjectivity manifests in the educational realm via policies that place blame for scholastic underachievement largely on the backs of teachers. The central argument of this chapter sees neoliberalism’s crisis as rooted in a growing public frustration and resentment over being faulted for forces largely out of their control. The neoliberal logic of systematically subjecting the population to perpetual discipline and evaluation – even the professional evaluators themselves – has initiated a core contradiction on the cultural terrain of pedagogical practice.

Before returning to this discussion of neoliberal subjectivity, I delve into a analysis of the domestic and international economic cycles leading into the neoliberal
turn. My objective is to highlight the deep structural forces at work in giving rise to neoliberalism as a set of governing principles and logics of control and how these have animated the educational reforms, in particular. I especially focus on Chicago, given its centrality in the education reform process, on the one hand, but also because of the significance of the CTU as being an inspiration for the broader teacher uprising and as a catalyst for sectoral change in the form and function of teacher unionism during this uprising.

The Economic Crisis Prompting the Neoliberal Turn

The turn to neoliberalism was prompted by the crisis of “stagflation” in the 1970’s which itself was precipitated by an underlying “crisis of capital accumulation,” as Harvey (2005) describes it. He notes: “In the US, the control of wealth by the top 1 per cent of the population had remained fairly stable throughout the twentieth century. But in the 1970s it plunged precipitously as asset values (stocks, property, savings) collapsed. The upper classes had to move decisively if they were to protect themselves from political and economic annihilation” (15). The boom that followed the shock of the world wars had lost steam, and capital had exhausted its ability to generate sufficient growth through existing avenues (Harvey, 2005; McNally, 2011). With profit rates falling steadily from the mid-1960s through to the late 1970’s, the elite raised a counter-offensive on labor and the broader social infrastructure that had been developed in the preceding era. On the net effect of this elite retrenchment, McNally (2011) writes:

The cumulative effects of these processes were profound. In the first instance, they involved a sustained and significant rise in the rate of exploitation – the gap between workers’ output and the value of their wages . . . It was not just wages that were pushed down . . it was also that speed-up and work intensification
compelled workers to produce more per hour. And in conditions of labor retreat, such productivity gains were claimed almost entirely by capital, a trend that began in the late 1970s and kept intensifying across the neoliberal period. In fact, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveal that labor productivity rose by an average of nearly 2 percent per year from 1979 to 2007, while real hourly compensation for workers edged up just a bit more than 1 percent a year. Over a period of nearly thirty years, this involved a huge allocation to capital of new wealth created by labor. In Marx’s terms, it signified an enormous increase in the rate of exploitation. (48).

On the international stage, the United States found itself unable to control global monetary flows, which prompted the end of the Bretton Woods system at the same time. Owing to the permeability of borders to financial flows, US dollars overwhelmed the world market, thus undermining the system of gold-backed fixed exchange rates (Harvey, 2005). With it went the GATT arrangement wherein global monetary policy would be oriented on reducing unemployment and inflation, rather than focusing on “free trade” as is the case now (Silver & Slater, 1999). Hardt and Negri (2000) note: “In the 1970s the crisis became official and structural. The system of political and economic equilibria invented at Bretton Woods had been completely thrown into disarray, and what remained was only the brute fact of U.S. hegemony” (266).

The Social Crisis Prompting the Neoliberal Turn

At the same time as the economic crisis of the 1970s, a social crisis brewed that, at its root, was characterized by the public’s frustration with the dominant mode of contentious politics of the prior half-century. In short, this was a crisis of unions as the principal organ of progressive politics. Organized around the workplace as the fundamental social unit, unions came to be a major political force by the mid-20th century, only to expend its mandate in the face of palpable frustration with the breadth of change. Wallerstein (2011) sums up the zeitgeist of 1968 as: “You have taken state power
but have not at all changed the world. If we, the revolutionaries of 1968, wish to change the world, we must replace you with new movements and new strategies. And we shall do this” (77). These revolutionaries were trapped within a liberal political foundation that would defend basic social provisions designed to guarantee a modicum of decency, but still trapped them within the same world of work to which their parents belonged. This increasingly educated generation aspired for ever greater freedoms from these constraints at the same time that pressures to discipline the workforce were ever greater, owing to the attendant economic crisis (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Wallerstein, 2011). Hardt and Negri (2000) note

The disciplinary regime clearly no longer succeeded in containing the needs and desires of young people. The prospect of getting a job that guarantees regular and stable work for eight hours a day, fifty weeks a year, for an entire working life, the prospect of entering the normalized regime of the social factory, which had been a dream for many of their parents, now appeared as a kind of death. (273-274).

In the face of Fordist restraint, the 60’s revolutionaries called for “freedom” and “flexibility,” which would come to constitute the foundation of the emerging neoliberal order, as discussed in the introductory section. For Hardt and Negri (2000), this fact is glimpsed in the concomitant collapse of the Soviet Union, built as it was on Fordist logics of worker discipline. In their view, the rising “immaterial economy” of increasingly educated workers could no longer be subjected to such a crude regime of discipline, which ultimately undermined its legitimacy. In the place of Fordism emerged a social organization wherein atomized individuals provide their intellectual and affective capacities for an economy increasingly built around networks and flows (Harvey, 2005; Hardt and Negri, 2000). The result is an effective inversion of the prior arrangement where capital organized labor into units that were then represented by unions. Now, the
trend is toward workers that engage themselves as independent in an economy privileging flexibility. While many workers might like the arrangement, in principle, for the freedom it permits in organizing one’s professional life, this focus on flexibility has also means transferring the burden of welfare to the individual. The overarching governing logic has been used to legitimize the ongoing assault on the social welfare state by stressing a libertarian ethos of personal responsibility. As a result, one’s misfortune is deemed the result of personal failing, rather than structural defects (Harvey, 2005).

In this context, “freedom” takes on a negative rather than positive formulation. It comes to mean the right to employ one’s privilege to whatever ends one chooses, even if it means promulgating harms upon others. Polanyi says that in this context freedom “degenerates into a mere advocacy of free enterprise,” wherein “the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property” (256-258). Neoliberalism embraces this inverted, negative freedom as a mechanism of legitimation for what has, in effect, been an intensification of the industrialization and commercialization that the ’60s rebels rose against. While immaterial workers have, indeed, been increasingly liberated from the confines of the shop floor, they have been unleashed upon a world now immersed in capitalist logics. Mandel (1975) relates:

Far from representing a postindustrial society, late capitalism constitutes generalized universal industrialization for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, overspecialization and parcellization of labor, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life. It is characteristic of late capitalism that agriculture is step by step becoming just as industrialized as industry, the sphere of circulation [e.g., credit cards and the like] just as much as the sphere of production, and recreation just as much as the organization of work.
The neoliberal subject possesses the “freedom” and “flexibility” to be exploited in all sectors of society and facets of life. If the crisis of Fordism was centered on the shop floor, the crisis of neoliberalism exists anywhere and everywhere. The core class tension has been smoothed out throughout social space, in response to being burst apart by the bubbling over of capitalism’s core contradictions in the 60’s. Jameson (1992) describes that moment one where social energies exploded in a process in which “liberation and domination are inextricably combined” and in which “the last vestiges of nature . . . are at length eliminated” (207). The result is confusion as delineations between private and public get blurred, and the terminologies and processes of modernism get confounded. For him, this scenario marks the postmodern condition in which the sign was split between its component signifier, signified and referent. Likewise, postmodern philosophy increasingly lost its connection to social issues, and instead focused on commenting on other texts. “Philosophy’ thereby becomes radically occasional; one would want to call it disposable theory, the production of a metabook, to be replaced by a different one next season, rather than the ambition to express a proposition, a position or a system with greater ‘truth’ value” (193).

The free-floating nature of the postmodern sign serves to attach “freedom” to the condition of an exploitation extended beyond the factory and spread throughout a public that has increasingly been devoured by private, profit-seeking interests. Meanwhile, the “flexibility” demanded of the 60’s generation has been used as cover to shift responsibility from the public sector to the private citizen. Risks are taken by the rich and
the fallout absorbed by society in what is something of an inversion of the Fordist
arrangement.

**The Birth of Neoliberal Education Reforms**

Out of the twin and interrelated economic and social crises of the late 1960s and
1970s, the elite project of neoliberal retrenchment was born: one in which flexibility and
this negative freedom were effected through various schemes of privatization, cutbacks in
spending, public-private partnerships, and neo-Taylorist mechanisms of surveillance. In
the educational domain, a marriage of convenience emerged between neoliberal
reformers that sought to make schools work like markets, not only in the interest of
market “efficiency,” and conservatives concerned by the gains of the 60s movements,
especially the Civil Rights movement (MacLean, 2017). Specifically, as Maclean (2017)
demonstrates, early reform efforts were bound up with elite fears about desegregation.
Out of this fear, voucher schools were concocted as a mechanism to technically embrace
desegregation while effectively keeping schools segregated in Virginia of the 1970s by
two leaders of the neoliberal reform movement: James Buchanan and G. Warren Nutter
(Maclean, 2017). At the same time, vouchers represented a means by which advocates of
neoliberal policy could put their vision of a diminished public sector into practice within
the educational terrain. Maclean describes how this mobilization of elite interests and
right-wing ideologues was prompted by the economic malaise of the day: “The worst and
longest recession since the Great Depression, followed by a mystifying period of
stagflation and compounded by new competition from abroad, enabled the wider right to
draw more and more corporate leaders into action. They wanted not just to rein in
regulation and taxation, but also to dethrone the dominant paradigm of Keynesian economics that was at the core of the midcentury social contract” (136).

Meanwhile, others involved in this elite movement began initiating a discourse that shifted blame for problems in education away from broader social and economic issues to teacher performance. This discourse was accelerated at the national level under the Reagan administration with its publishing of *A Nation at Risk* by education Czar, T.H. Bell (Goldstein, D., 2014). In narrowly placing blame for the nation’s economic woes on failing schools and holding teachers responsible for those failing schools, this influential document invited education policy that introduced excessive disciplinary measures on individual schools and teachers for subpar performance on standardized tests. While these initiatives were ultimately encouraged by national-level legislation, the enactment of these reforms occurred unevenly across various states and municipalities. Typically, though, majority minority communities were singled out for reforms, with Chicago ultimately becoming a laboratory for them during the latter half of the second Richard Daley’s mayoralty.

**Chicago: A Laboratory of Neoliberal Education Reforms**

In order to understand the process by which Chicago became the centerpiece for neoliberal education reforms, one must first zoom out and look at larger economic forces. Like other cities in the former northern industrial heartland, Chicago’s once robust economy had progressively been decimated during the era of white flight and deindustrialization in the post-war years, thus undermining its tax base (Castells, 1989; Sassen, 2001; Weber, 2010). At the same time, federal urban renewal dollars were
drastically cut back during the Reagan years and never subsequently restored (Lipman, 2011). In response, the city turned to finance to fill the gap, through which it pioneered the use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) (Weber, 2010). Weber (2010) explains:

TIF is a local economic development policy that allows municipalities to designate a “blighted” area for redevelopment and securitize the expected increase in property taxes from the area to pay for initial and ongoing redevelopment expenditures there (for more details about the mechanics of TIF, see Weber 2003). Once designated, taxpayers in that area pay real estate taxes on the value of their property prior to the creation of the TIF district, as well as on any increase in its value. However, for the life span of the district (which in most states is about 20 years), all taxes on any new value in the district are directed into a fund to pay for public redevelopment expenditures, such as debt service on bonds floated for infrastructure or private acquisition costs. (p.258)

With time, the pressure to pay off the underlying loans has effectively caused TIFs to move away from their original urban renewal purpose. Briffault (2010) describes how the notion of what constitutes “blight” has morphed in the eyes of legislatures and courts throughout the country from “the slum image of decayed or deteriorated structures, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and economic and social distress to something a lot more like ‘underdeveloped’ or lacking the physical or legal preconditions for further economic development” (p.78). In Chicago, this change of course was legally effected by a 1999 amendment to the state of Illinois’ “TIF-enabling act” to only require that half of the parcels in a district be greater than 35 years old and “potentially blighted in the future” (Weber and O-Neill-Kohl, 2013, p.203). This amendment has, in turn, led to a re-orientation of TIF allocation from job-creation to real-estate development. Geographically, the result has been a bias toward projects abutting the “Loop” central business district, which had been previously undervalued due to the presence of barriers like rivers and railways (Weber, 2010).
Nonetheless, after years of public pressure over the narrow focus of TIFs on development, officials began channeling these funds into education projects, but generally with a marked preference for “choice” schools (Farmer & Poulos, 2015). For example, the city built six new elite selective enrollment schools starting in the late-90’s to assuage concerns about the quality of the existing system in a period when governing officials were focused on luring in businesses as part of its post-industrial reinvention as a “global city” (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Farmer & Poulos, 2015). In analyzing data for the year 2010, Farmer and Poulos found that despite only comprising one percent of the schools in the city, the selective enrollment schools received 33 percent of the expenditures, against 48 percent allotted to traditional neighborhood schools, which make up 69 percent of all schools (Farmer & Poulos, 2015, pp. 162-163). While this is just a limited one-year sample, it does nonetheless provide one telling illustration of how TIF’s are used to undermine existing community-rooted schools in favor of alternatives based on “performance” and “accountability” (Lipman, 2011).

In sum, the neoliberal turn to finance resulted in a geographic reshaping of the city wherein development was tied to profitability rather than community sustainability. At the local level, these policies comported with Mayor Richard Daley’s desire to keep middle class families in the city by providing attractive education infrastructure (Ashby & Bruno, 2016). Meanwhile, the broader shift in the focus of municipal policy in Chicago reflected a global process wherein government was brought into line with the dictates of global finance. Geographically, this shift has translated into the development of a bifurcation between a hollowed out industrial corridor, on the one hand, and a
renovated central business district catering largely to tech and finance workers (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Castells, 1989; Lipman, 2011; Sassen, 2001).

These “gentrified” areas receive a disproportionate share of the city’s education funding through the fact that children from these communities are more likely to be accepted into one of the well-funded and highly regarded magnet schools (Ashby & Bruno, 2016). The rest of the city has, meanwhile, been subjected to chronic underfunding of most schools, outright closures of others, and a shift in resources to largely non-unionized charter schools (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Lipman, 2011).

At the same time, charterization” has opened the doors for the capture of public schools by market forces, as noted in a 2012 Reuters report:

Traditionally, public education has been a tough market for education for private firms to break into - fraught with politics, tangled in bureaucracy and fragmented into tens of thousands of individual schools and school districts from coast to coast. Now investors are signaling optimism that a golden moment has arrived. They’re pouring private equity and venture capital into scores of companies that aim to profit by taking over broad swathes of public education. (Simon, 2012)

In short, neoliberal education policy has sought to doubly displace education from its role as bedrock of the community: by reshaping urban space to adapt to the needs of global finance, and by opening up space for private investors to profit on public education. In practice, Lipman (2011) describes the resulting reforms as marking a move from “government to governance”: a shift to a logic of monitoring and controlling populations. This has meant oversight bodies have been increasingly insulated from public purview and turned over to specialists charged with bringing the school in line with the market principle of “efficiency,” largely determined by test-based performance (Lipman, 2011). This restructuring has permitted more fluid streamlining of urban
education policy with the mandates of the federal “No Child Left Behind” NCLB law and latterly the “Race to the Top” (RTTP) legislation, through which funding allotments have been tied to performance on standardized tests (Lipman, 2011). For example, in Chicago, the school system was placed under the control of a CEO in 1995. Subsequently, the city passed the “Renaissance 2010” plan in 2006, which called for 60 closings and the opening of 100 alternative, mostly charter, schools, with closure decisions being guided by results of standardized tests (Lipman, 2011).

What is notable about these reforms is not that government assumed the responsibility of testing and evaluating students and teachers so much as the high-stakes nature of the testing regime that resulted. Previous efforts at standardization, such as in the case of the development of the Standard Aptitude Test (SAT), were designed to provide a mechanism to sort students into certain roles within the burgeoning industrial economy (Hartman, 2003). In this context, tests played a disciplinary, rather than a controlling, function in society. Educators retained a good deal of control over pedagogy because the fortunes of the school districts were not directly tied to test results the way they are under current policy (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Hartman, 2003; Lipman, 2011).

In contradistinction, Hartman (2003) compares the controlling function of today’s testing regime to that of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) within the global economy: a mechanism that forecloses local sovereignty by locking countries into a regulatory framework privileging financial flows over all else. An instructive example of the convergence of these two mechanisms of control is provided by Apple (1996) in his recounting of a visit to an Asian dictatorship wherein slum-dwellers were deprived social services, including education, in an effort to discourage people from populating the
slums. However, there was little choice for those displaced from rural lands turned over to agribusiness companies, which largely focused on growing potatoes for the American market. The American appetite for French fries was indirectly driving the deprivation of education of displaced farmers on the other side of the world: not because Americans demanded this arrangement, of course, but because neoliberal logics dictated it.

These logics view education as an expendable instrumentality rather than a core component to a healthy society. It is here that the divergent nature of the current regime is glimpsed most vividly. In the New Deal-era regime of evaluation in which the SAT emerged, education was still viewed as valuable in and of itself: the tests merely served to determine who was worthy of an elite college education (Hartman, 2003). Those scoring poorly on the test were not at risk of having their schools shuttered or handed over to private charter organizations. Moreover, inept teachers were not yet viewed as one of the primary sources of the country’s problems, though that idea would soon germinate in mass media portrayals of a school system needing to be brought to heel.

**A Crisis of Trust**

Neoliberalism as a governing project has had great success in realizing a return to profitability off of the backs of workers, through the implementation of a monitorial regime of control – “lean production” - at workplaces and schools, on the one hand, and a political assault aimed at dislocating the working-class and undermining unions in core economies, on the other hand. The success of this project of elite retrenchment, though, has come at enormous costs in terms of social stability: from the rise of neo-nationalist right-wing extremism in the United States and other major powers, to ever rising levels of
mistrust of political, bureaucratic and media institutions. The current crisis of neoliberalism is, at its root, a fundamental crisis of trust.

Trust is the casualty of logics that discursively place all blame and responsibility on the individual. Each person is stripped of social context and the conditions, constraints and privileges that come with one’s position in the social totality. Monbiot (2016) describes the logics of neoliberalism as a situation wherein:

We internalize and reproduce its creeds. The rich persuade themselves that they acquired their wealth through merit, ignoring the advantages – such as education, inheritance and class – that may have helped to secure it. The poor begin to blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances.

Never mind structural unemployment: if you don’t have a job it’s because you are unenterprising. Never mind the impossible costs of housing: if your credit card is maxed out, you’re feckless and improvident. Never mind that your children no longer have a school playing field: if they get fat, it’s your fault. In a world governed by competition, those who fall behind become defined and self-defined as losers.

A social schema that doles out blame for social problems rather than identifying the underlying social causes is one that has resulted in a pedagogy of crisis in the educational realm. It is a pedagogy that is focused on testing for failures in individual districts, schools, and classrooms in an effort to root out any inefficiencies so as to avoid the recurrence of profit slump that visited the elite in the 1970s. In the next chapter, I will develop a heuristic model through which I argue that the crisis of stagflation was discursively displaced into the cultural terrain, with teachers and schools being one of the principal scapegoats for the malaise of American industry in that era. The pedagogy of crisis that emerged out of the subsequent educational reforms effectively locate problems in the educational domain, not in the dysfunctional societies they are encased in.
Teachers get blamed for the way that economic and social issues manifest in the educational domain rather than educational underachievement in underserved communities being seen as a reflection of economic problems. It is a pedagogy befitting a hegemonic power realizing the limits of its power and capacity to command the global economy: a pedagogy reflective of an elite desperate for scapegoats to explain its shortcomings, and, until now, short on rigorous discourses addressing the structural nature of the crisis.

However, this politics of blame and shame is realizing its limits in the educational domain. What activist teachers have shown is that there is little patience in the community for the scapegoating of teachers. Not only have these upstart activists proven remarkably successful in building dynamic community organizations – especially in Chicago – but the walkouts and wildcat strikes of 2018 proved highly popular with the public (Blanc, 2019; Uetricht, 2014), despite often being the target of vilification on the part of political leadership and in much of the major news media (as addressed in Chapter 5). In short, the public has not bought the line about teachers failing them. Rather, they see teachers as an integral part of their communities: people that have answered the call to public service and that are, typically, doing all in their power to help their students, despite whatever challenges might be posed by prevailing conditions in those communities.

The evaluative and monitorial apparatus erected as part of the neoliberal project is confronting its internal contradictions in its application to the professional evaluators. The sheer absurdity of these logics of surveillance taken to such extremes in the pedagogical domain is clear for the public to see. I also hold that the public identifies
with striking teachers so much because they, too, have been subjected to this relentless regime of scrutiny. They see their own struggles in the struggle of striking teachers. Moreover, the public takes offense when teachers are blamed for societal problems because those teachers are also their children’s caretakers. A political attack on teachers is, thus, widely viewed as an attack on the social fabric. Indeed, this discursive tactic – attacking striking teachers - appears to be a lot less effective than it is in other sectors.

In sum, educators occupy a critical chokepoint in the circulation of ruling logics and their legitimation, on the one hand, but also in the way the monitorial and evaluative regime is effected. Not only are schools not “apart from the society” they operate in, as Apple (2006) notes, but they are also integral to how the dominant social organization of any epoch is administered. Teachers, after all, prepare students to be citizens and workers within that given social totality. They set the mold for students in their formative years. As such, their growing frustration with the conditions in which they operate is highly significant in signaling the crisis of legitimation that the neoliberal project is facing.
Chapter 3: Teachers in the Circuits of Communication

Education as a Site of Struggle

The previous chapter delineated the historical forces that gave rise to neoliberalism as a governing project, and how neoliberal logics have been applied within the domain of education broadly, before specifically going into the case Chicago. I highlighted the case of Chicago because it was used as something of a laboratory for neoliberal education reforms, on the one hand, but also because I argue that the CTU has played central as a catalyst for broader sectoral change in the organizational structures and communicative dynamics of teacher unions that has continued with the rolling walkouts of 2018-19.

This chapter turns the focus to the flow of education discourses through society in order to emphasize the importance of teacher activists’ communicative and discursive interventions. Because so much of the neoliberal offensive on education was built upon cultivating an image of teachers and school as inept and dysfunctional in communicative circuits – e.g. the news media, the realm of political discourses as well as the entertainment media - it has been especially important for teachers to counter that portrayal with an image of their own. In other words, it has not been enough for teachers to engage in traditional bargaining around contractual issues, given that the assault on education has taken such a discursive form. This battle is about meaning: that is, how we make sense of the role of education and teachers in society.

As mentioned in the last chapter, myriad education reforms have been passed in states and municipalities throughout the country over the last 40-50 years, eventually
anchored at the federal level by “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) under the second Bush administration and “Race to the Top” under the Obama administration. These reforms have focused on heightening the evaluative role of the state in assessing the quality of schools and teachers, largely based on the results of standardized tests, while also opening pathways for the creation of privately operated and publicly funded alternative “charter” schools. The justification has almost universally been that education is in crisis, owing to its reluctance to embrace market logics of efficiency and continual evaluation (Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Goldstein, R., 2011, Lipman, 2011). At the same time, the entertainment and news media have both tended to portray teachers as a central part of the problem, treating them variously as inept, lazy, out-of-touch and conservative in their worldview (Ayers, 2001; Goldstein, R. 2011; Kantor et al, 2001). The image that emerges is one of an antiquated institution in desperate need of market discipline in order to bring it into line with the needs of contemporary society.

There has been significant work done on news media framing as both justifying and naturalizing the reforms comporting with the neoliberal counteroffensive of this era (Apple 2001, 2013; Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Goldstein, D., 2014; R. Goldstein, R., 2011; Lipman, 2011). Meanwhile, others have inspected the role of pop culture films and television shows in furthering the image of educational crisis and the need for savior teachers to swoop in and save the inept mass of teachers (Ayers, 2001; Kantor et al, 2001).

Nonetheless, there is little in the way of theory with which to situate these discourses within broader economic and political power structures as logics of legitimation. Moreover, this is an important hole to fill, given the centrality of
educational practice in the formation and transmission of dominant logics, and the creation of space from which to interrogate those structures (Apple 2013; Bernstein, 1990). As such, this chapter holds that media framing of education is inherently different than most instances of framing, because it involves the portrayal of an institution that serves a similar role to the mass media itself: one involved in meaning-making and the promulgation of narrative and discourse (Gitlin, 2003; Thomas, 2011).

In this chapter, I develop a heuristic model to chart the flow of discourses through societal circuits: the political arena, the news and entertainment media, the realm of educational practice, and within the teachers’ movement (as a counterhegemonic discursive intervention). The objective with this heuristic is to illuminate how logics embedded in discourses are naturalized via their recontextualization across different societal spaces. At the same time, it is important to note that no discourses flow in a closed system. While the elite have an advantage in setting the bounds of discourse, this is never complete. Teachers, due to their occupation of a critical chokepoint in the circulation of discourses, have the power to contest them as part of their counterhegemonic communicative intervention.

By forming more militant union slates, as Chicago teachers have done, or by organizing walkouts and wildcat strikes, as teachers throughout the country did in 2018-19, teachers have demonstrated their signifying power. They have shown that they wield the power to contest the dominant frames of the expendability of “failing” schools by re-asserting the importance of local schools to the health of the communities in which they are embedded (Brogan 2013, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Uetricht, 2014). Because school teachers, especially in public schools, constitute one of the few professions that remains
heavily unionized in this country and elsewhere, they are particularly well-positioned to challenge policy that they deem detrimental to a healthy educational environment, in addition to the logics and media frames deployed to justify those policies.

This capacity for contestation not only comes through union activity, but also via the quotidian interactions that teachers have with students and community members. Owing to the amount of time that teachers spend with pupils, they are some of the few figures outside of the household that can compete with the mass media in structuring the ways in which young people perceive the world (Apple, 1995 2012). While curricula tend to reflect culturally hegemonic views, their enactment is a contested process with room for resistance. In other words, economic structure does not determine educational practice, but rather conditions the contradictory process of production and reproduction of knowledge (Apple, 1995).

Education is also a site of community struggle, as evinced in the prominent part that schools have historically played in the racial justice movement in this country’s history. Apple (2012) notes: “Struggles over schooling—over what should be taught, over the relationship between schools and local communities, over the very ends and means of the institution itself—have provided a crucible for the formation of larger social movements toward equality” (p.20). In this sense, teachers are not passive subjects upon whom dominant discourses are brought to bear: they are actively engaged in an interdiscursive relationship with the power elite and mass media, through their pedagogical interventions and community activism.

This chapter aims to inspect the nature of this interdiscursivity, by addressing the question of how the mass media treatment of teachers relates to larger structural forces
that inform the onset of neoliberalism as a governing logic. Given the preponderance of “crisis” talk within media framing of education, how do economic and social crises bear on discourses surrounding the form and function of education in society? What has been the effect of teachers’ contestation of this crisis narrative, and how have they been able to transform the larger discourse more to their favor? Lastly, what model emerges of the relationship between teachers and the mass media in the ongoing conversation about the role of education in society?

These questions will be addressed in three steps, each with its own dedicated section. Firstly, I will flesh out a theoretical framework that relates educational policy and practice via the interdiscursive struggle between policymakers and teachers. This section will distill literature arguing that education practice emerges from dominant, but contested, discourses that get re-contextualized in subsequent stages of campaign rhetoric, policy enactment, pedagogical practice, and popular discourse on education. Secondly, I will delineate the mass media’s role in this cycle, by showing how an “education in crisis” trope emerged from pop culture and reappeared in news media coverage of education policy and teachers. In addition to highlighting some of the manifestations of mass media framing, this section will use Iyengar’s (1991) typology to argue that the tendency has been to cover education policy thematically (as being in “crisis”), while covering teachers episodically (as alternatively being responsible for the crisis or being the outside savior that swoops in to save the dysfunctional system). Thirdly, this crisis talk will be framed as reflecting a broader economic and social malaise that emerged out of the economic stagnation of the 1970s. In this vein, I concede that there is a crisis of sorts, but that it is rooted in broad economic and social structures,
which, nonetheless, bear on the educational realm because of the latter’s central role in
the formation and transmission of logics of legitimation of these dominant structures. In
concluding, I will argue that media framing of education is part of a broader
interdiscursive process of structuring the dominant social and political order, addressing
its problems, and attempting to resolve its internal crises.

**Education and the Interdiscursive Struggle Over Policy Frames**

I hold that the study of the mass media framing of education is not analogous to
other framing studies, because of the unique role that education plays in the production of
dominant logics alongside the mass media itself. As Gitlin (2003) relates: “It is the
cultural industry as a whole, along with the educational system, that most coherently
specializes in the production, relaying, and regearing of hegemonic ideology” (p.254).
While it is probably always overly simplistic to see framing as a unidirectional process, it
would be particularly problematic in media coverage of education. Therefore, it is
important to flesh out a theoretical framework showing how educational practice and
policy formations are commingled in an interdiscursive cycle.

In doing so, I will build on three core assumptions about the function of education
in society taken from radical pedagogy. Firstly, ideological discourses occurring in
society writ large are mirrored in the realm of education through struggle over policy and
structure. In other words, political rhetoric and education practice share an intertwined
relationship through which knowledge and policy are created and transferred (Bernstein,
1990). Secondly, education is the central terrain wherein debates over what constitutes
knowledge are carried out, and, by extension, status is distributed (Apple, 1995; Bowles
and Gintis, 1976). Thirdly, this process is contested, thus rendering the educational realm
inherently contradictory, insofar as it serves to legitimate existing power relations while also privileging diversity and openness in a way that often threatens entrenched power (Apple, 1995; Bernstein, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In this sense, education is involved in both production and reproduction, and, thus, serves both an economic and cultural function. In other words, it is not just a site of the distribution of knowledge and status, but also a site wherein cultural hegemony is established in a contested and contradictory process (Apple, 1995). Taken together, these assumptions reveal education to be a terrain of struggle over politics and identity: one that reflects broader processes of “coming to be” in a democratic society characterized by ever-evolving conflict about the purpose and direction of that society.

Bernstein (1990) provides a model for how ideological discourses are transferred from society writ large to the educational realm. He sees this process as occurring on the three fronts of production, reproduction, and re-contextualization. These correspond, respectively, to the development of new knowledge, the transmission of knowledge through pedagogical practice, and the field where discourses and logics around production are transferred into different contexts (Bernstein, 1990). By mediating the process of the development and dissemination of knowledge in addition to the larger conversation around the nature and function of schooling, educators occupy a parallel and comingled arena with the political arena in which dominant discourses are constructed and transmitted. Moreover, these discourses are transferred from context to context in a manner that naturalizes their underlying assumptions (Apple 2001, Bernstein, 1990).

Regarding the transfer of neoliberal logics into the educational realm, Apple (2001) charts how the neoliberal consensus emerged as a marriage of convenience of
several different political strands. He emphasizes that there was no grand conspiracy of sorts behind the push for market reforms, but rather a confluence of forces:

An economic context in which public spending was under severe scrutiny and cost savings had to be sought everywhere; government officials who were opposed to “frills” and consistently intervened to institute only a selection of the recommendations; ideological attacks on critical, progressive, or child-centered approaches to physical education; and a predominant discourse on “being pragmatic” (p. 75).

Support for these reforms came, in part, from a technical and managerial middle class, not out of ideological resonance, per se, but because of the fact they possessed the expertise necessary for implementation of an education agenda built around “ideologies of control measurement and efficiency” (Apple, 2001, p.48). As such, their economic security and class mobility hinged on the capacity to provide the technical services necessary to enact the regimes of testing and evaluation that serve to sort the population by class in the neoliberal era. Apple (2001) also notes that the broader middle class tends to possess the necessary “cultural capital” to negotiate the increasingly complex and multifarious admissions regimes that have emerged in the heavily “charterized” education landscape. Moreover, many members of minority communities have embraced these reforms for affording them the opportunity to be treated as consumers in a system that had previously closed them off in an eviscerated public sector. Meanwhile, those possessing the cultural capital necessary to navigate the admissions procedures of selective charter schools have occasionally realized appreciable gains in education quality for their children (Apple, 2001; Lipman, 2011).

In sum, a particular set of logics regarding education practice were naturalized in the policy formation process and then embraced by large segments of the population that could benefit economically. These logics grew out of a discourse on education quality
that framed a supposed crisis as emerging, and largely attributed that crisis to teacher performance, as mentioned in the last chapter with regards to the Reagan administration’s stemming from its publication of “A Nation at Risk” (Goldstein, D., 2014). The reports used alarmist language about the country’s flagging economic competitiveness, while transferring blame for these economic woes squarely on the shoulders of teachers, lamenting that: “Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.” It does not indicate how many are taken from the bottom quarter, or what a desirable benchmark would be. Moreover, it does not bother to contextualize this statistic, by showing, for example, the differences between suburban and inner-city schools, nor does it interrogate the race and class-based divisions in education quality, and the deep-seated structural biases that explain these divisions.

The report abstracts its assessment of schools from social and economic structure, while invoking a moral panic about the direction of the country (Goldstein, D., 2014). While many of its recommendations are reasonable, such as the longer school day, the administration ultimately focused its attention on cost-cutting measures, as part of its larger orientation on lean government. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, which had previously been willing to defend teachers and public schools, found itself having to compromise on a lot of these issues, owing to an implosion of popular support for public education (Goldstein, D., 2014). The Reagan administration had effectively set the discursive agenda with its crisis narrative, which became naturalized in the public’s eyes as it cycled through enacted policy and into broader societal discourse, ultimately devouring what was once the opposition party on social issues like these.
Eventually, teacher frustration with these reforms began to simmer over. In 2010, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) won leadership of the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU), and latterly went on strike in 2012 to contest the school closings and the larger problem of pedagogy rooted in standardized test results (Brogan, 2013; Lipman, 2011). While a recently passed state bill required the strike to be based on narrow contractual demands, they effectively toed a tenuous line in raising the broader critiques of the ongoing reform process and initiating a public discourse on the role of education in local communities (Brogan 2013, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Uetricht, 2014). In CTU president Karen Lewis’s words, the strike was about “the very soul of education” (Brogan, 2014).

With this, the CTU initiated a counter-discourse on the importance of local schools to the communities in which they are embedded (Brogan 2013, 2014; Uetricht, 2014). Meanwhile, the CTU was able to gain widespread public support for their efforts, despite the media campaign being lodged against them (Uetricht, 2014). In sum, the need to apply market discipline to schools has gone from dominant discourse to formal policy to naturalized logic, while an emerging counter-discourse has risen and already realized some success in upending the formal policy and its logic of legitimation.

**Mass Media’s Role: Naturalizing the Crisis Trope**

Understanding the role of mass media in contributing to this interdiscursive cycle is vital, owing to the ubiquity and prominence of media in the current era (Kellner & Share, 2007). Moreover, many scholars have remarked on the symbiotic relationship between traditional mainstream news media and political elites in framing the political
agenda (Bennett & Graber, 2007, Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), while also being able to generate consent around a set of dominant principles (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Meanwhile, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) note that the multiaxial nature of contemporary media permits entertainment media to influence political discourse as well. As such, this section considers depictions of education and educators across various media forms, looking for congruence of certain themes and narrative patterns, and then connecting these tendencies to the discourses outlined in the previous section.

The objective here is not to unearth an elite conspiracy operating within media organizations, but rather to use news coverage to highlight how the “primary definers,” i.e. the institutional voices that the news and entertainment media amplify - tend to conceive of education, teachers and their movements (Hall, 2013). In other words, I hold that the media is a useful referential source for understanding dominant viewpoints because of the sheer power that elite voices have in terms of being the principal sources for news coverage, while also being disproportionately responsible for the production and dissemination of content more generally. As Hall (2013) relates: “The media . . . do not simply . . . transmit the ideology of the ‘ruling class’ . . . but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access, as a right, to the media as “accredited sources” (p. 62). Hall’s conceptualization mirrors Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) sourcing filter, through which “the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest.” A frame analysis, thus, permits one to glimpse power structures operating beneath the human practices being reported upon.
Moreover, I hold that the teachers’ movements represent a privileged vantage point from which to glimpse the crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the concomitant efforts to forge a new hegemonic consensus, because education plays a central role in the social steering process. In this regard, Althusser (1971) assigns to education the role of the dominant “ideological state apparatus” (ISA) in advanced capitalist societies, owing to the sheer amount of time pupils spend under the watchful eye of school systems. While I endorse this view, I reject the functionalism at work in Althusser’s formulation, whereby economic determinacy is recovered “in the last instance,” so that the cultural institutions are only autonomous until the hard edge of structure has had its imprint. Following Gramsci (1971) and Hall (2016), I, instead, look at structure as having a conditioning rather than determining effect. In discussing the tendencies and constraints that emerge from economic structure, Hall (2016) argues:

The error of reductionism is then to translate these tendencies and constraints immediately into their absolutely determined political and ideological effects or, alternatively, to abstract them into some “iron law of necessity.” In fact, they structure and determine only in the sense that they define the terrain on which historical forces move; they define the horizon of possibilities. But they can neither in the first nor last instance fully determine the content of political and economic struggles, much less objectively fix or guarantee the outcomes of such struggles. (p.160)

I would further complicate Althusser’s (1971) formulation by arguing that there is not just one dominant ISA in the current epoch. It seems clear that the mass media plays at least an equally significant role in contemporary society, effectively acting as a separate pole pulling at children in their formative years. However, the respective roles these institutions play in society are markedly different in their form and function. For one, education systems are more democratic in nature than the mass media, as there is
simply more room for counter-hegemonic voices: in the form of teachers’ unions, the relative autonomy teachers have in pedagogical decisions (though this has arguably waned in recent years), and also the centrality of schools as sites for the organization of broader movements (Apple, 2013).

As such, I would contend that educational systems are more representative of the contradictions animating hegemonic crises like the current one. They are more adaptable and open to public pressures and draw upon a much larger percentage of the population, given that all children are required to spend their entire day at school every day. Meanwhile, the mass media tends to be more under elite control, with popular pressure limited to the consumptive end of the dissemination cycle.

Thus, while the mass media and educators do not exist in strict tension with one another, they are conditioned by sufficiently disparate forces to allow for some tensions to emerge. More fundamentally, I would argue that these tensions emerge out of the contradictions born of the interplay between ideology and social forces, which Hall (2016) describes as being dialectical in nature. In this formulation, a dominant ideology is promulgated and legitimated by major cultural institutions, including both mass media and education, but the underlying contradictions are witnessed within the school systems more so than within mass media, owing to the former’s relative openness to forces outside of its own circle of legitimation. In the current case, neoliberal logics have spread through both institutions, but contradictions have spilled over in the educational realm due to the direct, adverse effect of these policies and practices on teachers, together with teachers’ capacity to organize through unions (and otherwise), and to draw upon support in the community (Brogan 2013, 2014; Lipman, 2011; Author removed, 2018).
Furthermore, I hold that these contradictions are, in turn, animated by the tension between two different idealizations of the role of education in society. On one side is the traditional liberal, Deweyan view, which sees education as playing a prominent role in the cultivation of a robust and engaged citizenry; on the other side is the neoliberal view, which seeks to reduce education to a measurable instrumentality, as part of a broader process of market rationalization driving education policy (Lipman, 2011). While the latter view has been hegemonic for much of the last forty years, the former never vanished.

**A Heuristic Model of Discursive Flows on Education**

The heuristic illustrated below is designed to show the flow of discourses between cultural arenas that are of concern to this study. As a heuristic, it is not meant to be totalistic in nature. Clearly, there are adjacent cultural spaces that absorb the flow of discourses, and these discourses are challenged at each step along the way and synthesized with other discourses, and so on. Nonetheless, once a discourse becomes dominant, as neoliberal rationalizations had become by about the 1980s, when they were popular in political and media spaces, and able to bear on educational discourses through the activity of zealous reformers, then they tend to flow from circuit to circuit relatively freely. The process of re-contextualization between political discourse, education policy, education practice and popular discourse is marked by arrows following the flow clockwise. Meanwhile, I note that the two opposing poles of political discourse and educational practice are, respectively, dominated by the influence of mass media and teachers. The latter point is taken as a given, since teachers still tend to hold a great deal
of autonomy in designing and enacting curriculum (even as some of this power is being taken away in this era of reform). Moreover, class time tends to be composed purely of interaction among students and between students and teachers, with minimal media influence. The realm of educational practice is one where teacher influence is dominant.

Figure 1

Between these poles lie the intermediating realms of “education policy” and “popular discourse.” The former emerges from processes of political deliberation on how to structure education systems, while the latter constitutes the variegated responses of individuals to their educational experience. While education policy is not dominated by mass media effects, it results from political discourses that are. Likewise, popular reaction to educational experience is colored by the effect of teachers on the lives of
former pupils. Through day-to-day interactions with students, teachers transmit certain
value-sets and mores that are separate from the formal curriculum, but that nonetheless
play an important role in the development of pupils’ understanding of the world around

> Children spend a very large part of their lives inside the buildings we call schools. They come to grips with authority relations, with the emotional labor both of managing one’s presentation of self and of being with others who are both the same and different. Transformations in the content and structure of this key organization have lasting effects on the dispositions and values that we do and do not act upon, on who we think we are and on who we think we can become. Care, love, and solidarity—or the absence of them—are among the constitutive building blocks of one’s identity. (p.20)

Meanwhile, the long-term reaction of citizens to their experience with education
is also impacted by external stimuli, such as economic crises, which have the capacity to radially transform the public’s view of their past lived experiences, especially given the power of mass media to obscure the nature and cause of the crisis.

The focus of this section is in showing how the mass media has guided the political discourse part of the cycle by attributing the economic crisis to defects in the education system, through its episodic portrayals of inept teachers needing to be saved by a virtuous outsider (Ayers, 2001; Edling, 2014; Goldstein, R., 2011). The preponderance of this good/bad teacher duality has been a recurring theme in both popular culture media and news media coverage, serving to both prefigure and reify the view of teachers laid out in *A Nation at Risk*. This view effectively flattens the teacher experience, as it treats the profession in a non-relational way (Edling, 2014). Edling (2014) notes:

> “Stereotypes about teachers’ qualities are often defined in relation to a binary opposite, such as efficient and inefficient, new and old and progressive contra traditionalist . . . The
dualistic and rhetorical nature of political reports is used by politicians and the media to increase people’s astonishment, and thereby gain sympathy and support for their own opinions. This dualism is characterized by polarized and dividing features (good/ bad), such as being detached from social and everyday life and awareness that changes of any kind might take time and effort to accomplish” (403).

This binary is also glimpsed in a recurrent popular culture trope pointing an accusatory finger at teachers. Ayers (2001) charts the existence of this trope through Hollywood movies from the 1950s through to the 1990s, which tend to portray teachers as incompetent, with the exception of the outsider who swoops in to save the children. He starts with the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*, which depicts civilization doing battle with savagery in the form of a white liberal reformer joining the ranks of teachers in a dysfunctional and violent inner-city school, ultimately saving the desperate damsel of a female teacher in addition to the disorderly teenagers. In the 1974 film *Conrack*, the white savior moves to an island off the coast of South Carolina to whip the locals into shape, who are fortunate that the hero is immune from the deficiencies that seem to plague everyone else (Ayers, 2001). Meanwhile, the 1989 film *Lean on Me* depicts Morgan Freeman as a hero that Ayers describes as having an irrational devotion to the work of bringing order and discipline to the lawless high school (Ayers, 2001).

More recently, the outside savior trope recurred in the weekly television series, *Boston Public*. In this case, an ineffective black principal and administration is posed in contradistinction to teachers who enter the scene as “great white hopes who know what is best for all students, but particularly African American and low-income students” (Tillman & Trier, 2007, pp.127-128). Tillman and Trier note that the impression that is
left by this phenomenon is that teaching is a profession that anyone can do, despite abundant evidence suggesting that teachers with proper training fare markedly better than those who come in without a background in education. For example, Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) note that teachers with no student teaching experience vacate their jobs at “rates twice as high as those who have had such practice teaching” (p.5).

Nonetheless, the outside savior has been realized in practice via Teach for America (TFA): a non-profit that places recent college graduates into teaching positions in underserved communities under a public service guise. Lahann & Reagan (2011) characterize TFA as embodying “progressive neoliberalism”: that is, a logic “embracing neoliberalism’s focus on deregulation, business strategies, and the managerial culture of accountability, but working to fight inequality and to reform the systems which produced it” (p.20). In other words, TFA embodies the contradictions undergirding neoliberal education: pretending to fight inequities while embracing the logics that gave rise to them in the first place. Because market logics have been so successfully naturalized, participants in this program do not readily see this contradiction in plain view.

When not portraying teachers and administrators as broadly inept and ineffective, they are variously depicted as lazy, cynical and reactionary: all characteristics seen in the two main teachers of the *The Simpsons*, as described by Kantor et al. (2001). Lisa Simpson’s teacher, Elizabeth Hoover, is depicted as a dinosaur stubbornly impervious to change. Edna Krabappel, meanwhile, has shown a bit more complexity of character, though her principal purpose, at the end of the day, is as nemesis and roadblock to Bart. Moreover, the show repeatedly plays on the theme of school as a limiting institution: one that serves only to file students into a narrow range of potential future professions.
Opportunities to break free of the restraints of these permanent fixtures are limited, though one episode depicts an outside savior in the form of Mr. Bergstrom: a substitute teacher that Lisa fawns over because of his unconventional approach and intellectual passions. He is everything that her world is not: a contrast brought into sharp relief when Homer embarrasses Lisa in front of him during a chance encounter at a museum (Kantor et al., 2001).

In this formulation, the known world is one of limited possibility and restraint. Breaking free requires an outside intervention, because the dysfunctional schools and uninspired staff in place are simply not up to the task of elevating students to the level of achievement necessary to compete in today’s global economy (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cohen, 2010). The effect of this narrative on educational discourse is to treat schools primarily as an instrument of class ascendance: that is, of a mechanism to free people from the economic conditions they were born into. As such, educational performance is discursively tied to economic performance in the dominant narratives and tropes of popular culture coverage.

It figures, then, that the crisis theme would be amplified as economic opportunities began to narrow in the 1970’s, with the United States exiting a thirty-year long period of economic expansion. This was precisely the finding of Berliner and Biddle (1995), who chart the discursive attack by the political and media elite on schools and teachers beginning in this era. In the face of falling tax revenues, political leaders increasingly looked to balance budgets by enacting cuts in education, which were justified through the implementation of the crisis narrative (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This process accelerated after publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which they argue was
reported largely uncritically in the press: “This document was reported in literally hundreds of newspaper and television accounts across the nation, and as far as we can tell, none of those reports noted its lack of citations or called for documentation of its incendiary charges. As a result, the public was led to believe that the claims it made were unimpeachable” (p.169). The report had aligned so neatly with the existing narrative about school dysfunction and teacher incompetence that the findings were taken at face value, thus re-contextualizing the existing popular culture trope into a news media frame.

The function of this frame has been two-fold: on the one hand, to naturalize the crisis narrative, and, on the other hand, to hold individual schools and teachers accountable for the crisis (Anderson, 2007 Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cohen, 2010; Goldstein, D., 2014). In employing Iyengar’s (1991) typology, coverage of education has tended to be “episodic” rather than “thematic” in nature, where the former focuses on individual iterations of a problem as exemplars of the bigger issue, and the latter frames the problem as being systemic in nature. By generally focusing on anecdotes of inept traditional teachers, and outside saviors as veritable panaceas, the issue of underachievement in education was stripped of its structural roots (Anderson, 2007; Rooks & Bank-Munoz, 2015). In this frame, teacher and student performance is conflated with test scores, rather than seeing the latter as a function of economic conditions prevailing in the surrounding districts, or of sociological biases working against the student population. Anderson (2007) notes that this approach comports with a more general conservative tendency to value order as the principal resolutions to problems. In describing this conservative value-set and how it bears on education policy, Lakoff (2004) says:
Because immoral, undisciplined children can lead moral, disciplined children astray, parents should be able to choose to which school they send their children. Government funding should be taken from public schools and given to parents in the form of vouchers. This will help wealthier (more disciplined and moral) citizens send their children to private or religious schools that teach conservative values and impose appropriate discipline. (pp.83-84)

In other words, the teacher accountability frame is itself rooted in a “strict father” frame that serves as legitimation for existing class stratification. By this view, wealth is a reflection of innate personality traits, first and foremost. Predictably, then, poverty tends to be treated in a similarly episodic nature according to Iyengar’s (1991) study, with the poor being viewed as responsible for their own fate more than other societal subgroups (including the unemployed).

This correspondence between framing of poverty and education is no coincidence, moreover, given education’s contradictory relation to economic achievement. As mentioned earlier, one of the core assumptions about education emerging from the pedagogical literature is the conflicting role it plays in legitimating existing economic hierarchies while also privileging an openness to a diversity of knowledge and perspectives that hold the potential to undermine these hierarchies by offering opportunities to all (Bernstein, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Bowles and Gintis (1976) describe these as the “integrative” and “egalitarian” functions of education, respectively, noting that the former tends to drape itself in a meritocratic façade so that it seems to act like the latter. The result is that education is expected to accomplish that which it cannot possibly do, i.e. permit all that apply themselves the opportunity to climb the class ladder.

This tension between the integrative and egalitarian functions explains the tendency to fault the education system for social problems that are largely external to it. By viewing education as the principal mechanism of meritocratic advancement, I argue
that the public is primed to see educational dysfunction as the cause of economic crises.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) describe this function of education in capitalist society succinctly:

The technocratic view of production, together with the meritocratic view of hiring, provides the strongest form of legitimation of alienated work and social stratification in capitalist society. Not only does it strongly reinforce the notion that the hierarchical division of labor is technically necessary (albeit politically authoritarian), but it also justifies the view that job assignment is objective and efficient and, therefore, just and egalitarian (albeit severely unequal). Moreover, the individual is resigned to, if not satisfied with, his or her own position in the hierarchy of production. The legitimacy of superiors flows not from social contrivance but from Science and Reason. (p. 105)

People assume that because personal success is a meritocratic function of educational performance, then the obverse condition must be true for society writ large: the nation’s economic struggles must be indicative of failings throughout the whole of the education system. Moreover, given that poverty tends to be attributed to individual deficiencies (Iyengar, 1991), so too are problems with education.

This tendency to fault the individual for broader social problems is reflective of a subjective shift from classical liberalism to neoliberalism (Apple, 2001; Olssen, 1996). Olssen (1996) notes that classical liberalism tends to herald a self-interested economic actor as the core subject, whereas neoliberalism favors an active role for the state in forging a “manipulatable man.” He explains:

In an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, ‘performance appraisal’ and other forms of control generally. In this model the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark (p. 340).

None of this is to suggest that the educational realm does not have its problems. Nor is it to deny that a crisis, of sorts, exists. Instead, this article holds that the nature and cause of the crisis boils down to ideological questions. Neoconservatives will tend to
fault a lack of order and discipline in school systems for society’s problems, whereas neoliberals will point to a curriculum that is not adequately geared toward corporate needs, while progressives and leftists will tend to frame educational deficiencies as reflective of larger social injustices, such as the inequality of funding between schools in poor and affluent districts (Anderson, 2007).

The dominant ideologies seen in the media frames unpacked in this section reside in both neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies. The former is reflected in Hollywood tropes depicting unruly children, where vice has taken hold of young people, and regular teachers are powerless to subdue them without an outside savior. Meanwhile, the neoliberal frame is seen in the view that the stagnant American economy was caused by a burdensomely bloated public sphere. In the interdiscursive model of education policy and practice developed in this article, the media dominant realm of political discourse is colored by a marriage of convenience between these two political strands. Together, they represent the ideologies of the dominant social order that emerged out of the structural crises of the 1970s (Apple, 2001; Hardt & Negri, 2000). The next section will delineate the nature of those crises, and how they came to determine the discourses around education, their framing in the media, and the resulting policy and practice.

**On the Relationship Between Structure and Practice**

An appreciation of social structure is vital to understanding the dynamics of educational practice, owing to the first assumption about the function of education in society laid out earlier. Specifically, political discourse and education practice are
intrinsically interrelated, as the latter is reflected in the former over struggles over policy and structure in education. It is through this struggle that discourses are ultimately recontextualized and transferred from the political to the educational realm. This contested process reveals most vividly education’s contradictory functions of legitimation and critical inquiry. Apple (2006) relates:

Education is a site of struggle and compromise. It serves as a proxy as well for larger battles over what our institutions should do, whom they should serve, and who should make these decisions. And yet, by itself it is one of the major arenas in which resources, power, and ideology specific to policy, finance, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation in education are worked through. Thus, education is both cause and effect, determining and determined. (p.30)

American education saw a crisis emerge precisely because the society that encompassed it was faced with a crisis of its own. As already mentioned, Berliner and Biddle (1995) located the outgrowth of the educational crisis talk as occurring during the end of the era of great economic expansion in the 1970’s, when pressures began to mount to cut public expenditures in education, while, concomitantly, an evaluative culture emerged as a means of justifying these cuts (Apple, 2001), as discussed in the previous chapter.

However, I am not suggesting that the structural crisis determined the ensuing neoliberal turn in education policy, but, rather, that the context of crisis conditioned the discourses that emerged. My argument is that the “crisis of education” narrative arose out of the economic malaise of the day, as discourses began to center on uncovering a scapegoat for the nation’s declining industrial competitiveness. In this quest, one dominant tendency of both the political and media elite was to frame poor education standards as the primary culprit (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).
In sum, the crisis narrative served to naturalize the ensuing neoliberal reforms, whose principal effect has been the fortification of the elite in the world’s leading economies (Harvey, 2005; Picketty, 2014). The success of this project is seen in the rising income and wealth inequality in most industrialized countries over the past forty years, and also glimpsed in the rise of oligarchies in China, Russia, and many developing countries in which neoliberal policies have been prescribed (Harvey, 2005). As an example, Picketty (2014) notes that, between 1977 and 2007, 75 percent of growth in the US economy went to the top ten percent, with a full 60 percent being captured by the top one percent. Harvey (2005) relates:

> Neoliberalism has not been very effective in revitalizing global capital accumulation, but it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring, or in some instances (as in Russia and China) creating, the power of an economic elite. The theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal. (p.19)

Likewise, the discourses promulgated by elites around education reform served the same legitimating function. However, it is important to note that society did not neatly bifurcate between elite and marginalized groups during this process. In fact, many members of the latter have embraced these reforms for offering opportunities to escape underfunded and dysfunctional public-school systems, even if the alternatives effectively re-inscribe market logics that largely work to disadvantage these groups (Apple, 1996; Lipman, 2011). In the same manner, testing has often been viewed as a means of class ascension by poor and minority populations lacking any other viable path to economic betterment (Hartman, 2003).

In this respect, I endorse Stuart Hall’s (1985) notion of there being “no necessary correspondence” between a class of people and any specific ideology, so that
“determinacy is transferred from the genetic origins of class or other social forces in a structure to the effects or results of a practice” (p.95). In this formulation, structure is viewed as “previously structured practices” that serve to develop the conditions existent at the beginning of a narrative (p. 95). In this case, the story begins with a crisis of capitalism that precipitated a discursive and ideological turn to neoliberal logics seeking to rein in public expenditures and introduce market discipline into the public sector as a means for the economic elite to recapture lost standing. Meanwhile, the reforms were enacted in such a way as to often address real problems with the old model, such as in providing alternative charter schools in communities wherein the local public schools had suffered years of underfunding and neglect (Lipman, 2011).

From the “Crisis of Education” to the “Battle for the Soul of Education”

This fundamental crisis of American hegemony and industrial capitalism injected itself into the interdiscursive flow of signs and symbols that serves as the framework guiding this research, embedding a sense of limitation into the psyche of the nation, thus precipitating discourses of despair, evinced most lucidly in the political realm via the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Goldstein, D., 2014). While many critical commentators certainly recognized the structural roots of the crisis, the mass media tended to draw on pre-existing tropes of the savagery lurking in the nation’s schools as the source of the malaise. From Hollywood films to major television series, teachers were variously portrayed as inept, boring, old-fashioned, and restraining (Ayers, B., 2001; Berliner, D. and Biddle, B., 1995; Goldstein, D., 2014; Kantor et al, 2001; Tillman, L. and Trier, J.,
2007). These portrayals served to reinforce the discourses of crisis wherein economic problems were tied directly to teacher and student performance.

It is here that the gulf between the thematic and episodic news framing of education becomes particularly significant. By privileging the latter in its coverage, the commercial news media reduced a complex structural crisis to a trivial technical problem that could be solved with a healthy dose of market discipline. Anywhere and everywhere, the public was perceived as inefficient, wasteful and inept. It needed to be brought into line.

While this frame of a wayward public sector worked to convince large parts of the population of the need for neoliberal reforms, it also ultimately stoked resentment amongst those impacted by the decades-long assault on public education. The rise of a militant slate to the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in 2010, followed by the wave of teacher uprisings in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma and elsewhere in 2018, represents a compelling example of this frustration. The willingness by so many teachers to contest the market rationalizations of education represents a significant break with the dominant discourses and tropes surrounding the form and function of schooling in this country. One could reasonably well argue that this break demonstrates the fact that the existing social order has exhausted its ability to reproduce itself, thus creating a discursive and social opening: a widening of the landscape of ideas and organizational forms that are possible.

Indeed, CORE’s success is informed by its emphasis on sharing and discussing ideas about the relationship of schools to the communities they are embedded. Specifically, its early efforts of organizing reading groups in which the larger issue of
neoliberalism and its effects on the urban environment were discussed helped build lasting bridges with community groups that proved organizationally fruitful (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Brogan, 2014). This practice continued in 2012 as the strike neared, during which they organized teach-ins to educate people on the reasons for the strike, while countering unsympathetic mainstream media framing of their organizing efforts (Brogan, 2014).

This privileging of information is part of a more extensive embrace of greater democratization by CORE. This focus has translated into expanding the bargaining committee to 60 people, while also opening it up to greater transparency (Brogan, 2014). Meanwhile, in viewing their concerns as being interlinked with those of their communities, they have built coalitions with a range of neighborhood groups, most notably through the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), as a vehicle through which to resist slated school closures (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Brogan, 2014; Uetricht, 2014). As elaborated further in Chapter 4, CORE pushed the CTU in more of a “social movement unionism” direction. Rather than focusing narrowly on contractual demands, their struggle, in the words of CTU president Karen Lewis, has been about the very “soul of education” (Ashby & Bruno, 2016). Uetricht (2014) notes:

The CTU transformed itself from an organization representing the narrow economic self-interest of teachers into the principal body fighting for educational justice for CPS students – both in the eyes of the public . . . and in the eyes of its own members (p. 79).

It is also worth noting that the emphasis on school-community relations was an advisable tack to take in the critique of neoliberal reforms, given the fact that there is no broad consensus amongst teachers and parents on what exactly needs to be done as far as structuring schools and their systems of testing and evaluation. As mentioned earlier,
many members of marginalized communities have embraced these reforms, for the very fact that they represent change from an undesirable status quo (Lipman, 2011). Charter schools, in particular, are viewed as more accessible versions of the exclusive “magnet schools,” which base entry on test results and have been built to cater to elite populations in the city. In this way, magnets have effectively “primed the pump” for the ensuing “charterization” (Lipman, 2011). Furthermore, the occasional charter has been organized by progressive groups embracing a pedagogy privileging critical thinking and cultural awareness, such as the Betty Shabazz charter school in Chicago (Lipman, 2011).

As such, CORE’s principal message has not been one of opposition to testing or standardized assessments per se, as much as it is one of asserting that schools should serve the needs of communities rather than global financial flows.

The core issues being faced are not about testing or evaluation, per se, but, rather, about the form and function of education in a democratic society. The battle for the “soul of education” is one rooted in a belief amongst teachers that education should not serve the interests of the powerful but should instead be a conduit through which all citizens are capable of realizing their full potential, while also gaining the skills necessary to be members of an engaged citizenry (Ashby & Bruno, 2016).

In this section, I have delineated the history of this cycle of communication from crisis to contestation. The story began with the economic crisis of the 1970s, which precipitated the neoliberal turn to lean government as part of a process of elite entrenchment. In order to justify public spending cuts, policymakers sought a scapegoat, for which they drew on pre-existing tropes about the ineptitude of teachers and the barbarity of public-school populations. In addition to cuts, reforms have mandated
continual evaluation of student progress as a marker of the performance of both schools and teachers, which has served as a rationalization for the closures of traditional public schools, largely in underserved urban communities, the opening of privately run charters to replace them, and the concomitant turn to a mostly non-unionized teaching staff in these alternative schools. In response, teachers in a number of locations have mounted campaigns to push back on these reforms: efforts that have married community concerns about the fate of local public schools to teacher concerns about the broader function of schools in society.

**A Discursive Struggle**

I contend that this wave of teacher uprisings marks the latest realization of education as a site of struggle. However, the struggle is not merely a political one over working conditions and contract demands, but also a discursive one over how we make sense of the world around us, owing to the fact that education constitutes one of the central institutions involved in the production and reproduction of ideological hegemony (Apple, 1995). This is to say that prevailing value systems in any society are partially reflected and partially formed in this struggle over the soul of education. Market logics have been reflected in the educational realm via a process of successive recontextualizations from media trope to political rhetoric to public policy. In response, a counter-frame has emerged in the actions of teachers, permitting a synthesis of the dominant view with one that sees education as a bedrock of the community: a place that should serve the neighborhood it is embedded in, rather than a market that is external to it.
It is also important to note that this counter-frame has emerged in a time of opening of discursive space across the world, in which once moribund political ideologies have returned to the fore (on both the left and right side of the spectrum), and a palpable sense of frustration has risen in countries throughout the world. From Brexit to the election of Trump and other nationalists of the same flavor throughout the world to the resurgence of a long-moribund democratic socialism in places like the United States and United Kingdom, populations have repeatedly expressed their disaffection with the neoliberal center and its politics of transferring sovereignty to outside forces: be it global finance or Brussels or Washington, D.C.

In other words, the current teachers’ struggle is part of a broader crisis of neoliberalism: a hegemonic break in which cultural institutions, like schools, are realizing heightened importance in the reformulation of dominant logics. This is because, as Apple (2015) notes:

Educational institutions are not apart from society. They are central elements of that society—as work places, as sites of identity formation, as places that make particular knowledge and culture legitimate, as arenas of mobilization and learning of tactics, and so much more. (p.159)

Nonetheless, he notes that the process of transforming society through education requires sustained collective action, which also necessitates a recognition of how conservative forces have used education policy as a mechanism of change themselves, in naturalizing neoliberal logics over the previous forty years (Apple, 2015). In other words, educators must appreciate the fact that they operate in a domain of ongoing discursive struggle over ideological hegemony in society. In this sense, the battle for the soul of education is also a battle over how we interpret the world around us, what type of
knowledge gets privileged, what social problems receive attention, and how society is constituted in addressing those problems.
Chapter 4: Class, Gender and the Struggle for Autonomy in Teaching

The Importance of Class and Gender in Education

The previous chapters have situated the teachers’ uprising of the last decade in the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism, arguing that the educational realm has been a central site of struggle in this crisis due its integral role in the legitimation of ruling logics, on the one hand, and due to the contradictions that inhere in education being part of the evaluative/monitorial apparatus of neoliberalism. Most of the discussion there focused on the logics specific to neoliberalism, rather than longer running system of domination and exploitation operating in the realm of education. In this chapter, I turn to inspecting those systems: specifically, in terms of how gender and class figure as part of the patriarchal division of labor between the productive and reproductive realm, with women historically relegated to the latter in the un- and under-compensated roles of housewives, care workers, domestic workers, nannies and teachers.

I will then flesh out the history of this patriarchal division of labor as it has colored battles over the form and function of education in society. In so doing, I treat gender and class dynamics as an integral part of the constitution of hegemonic consensus, instead of something that operates in another realm. In other words, rather than separating economic structure from cultural practice, I treat them as mutually constitutive of ruling logics and their associated discourses.

This chapter argues that the class and gender dynamics must be viewed together, because the tendency toward proletarianizing teaching as a profession is inextricably bound up with its legacy as a female-dominated profession (Apple, 1986). Moreover, I contend that recognizing this linkage allows for a more robust understanding of the forces
animating the teachers’ movement throughout the country at the current historical juncture. As discussed in previous chapters, one effect of neoliberal reforms in education has been to shift the discourse on education to one of evaluating teachers based on student progress as narrowly defined by standardized test results. The significance of this reform process for the purposes of this chapter is that “it is the history of the state, in concert with capital and a largely male academic body of consultants and developers, intervening at the level of practice into the work of a largely female workforce” (Apple, 1986, pp. 36-37).

In synthesizing this critical feminist theory with the history of education reform initiatives, I advance five core arguments. Firstly, I demonstrate that teaching has historically been a gendered profession because of its position adjacent to other care work, i.e. reproductive labor, which has historically been viewed as uniquely befitting young women as they began to enter the workforce in the early to mid-20th century. Secondly, I argue that teaching has historically been underpaid and singled out for monitorial management by paternalistic reformers, though female teachers have been able to push back more forcefully in recent years as they have gained leverage by being welcomed into other domains of work, and as teachers’ unions have been established and gained strength throughout the country. Thirdly, I argue that feminized work—like teaching—is taking on increased importance in contemporary struggles because of the increasing centrality of immaterial labor in the social organization of leading economies. Lastly, I argue that teachers generally reside at a contradictory class position—between the proletariat and petty bourgeoisie—though the pendulum tends to swing to the former
in times of elite retrenchment, such as during the neoliberal epoch, with teachers especially singled out for “proletarianizing” reforms due to their gender profile.

**On the Origin of Capitalist Patriarchy**

Much of the scholarship on the gendered division of labor comes from the feminist socialist tradition: one that emerged out of a desire by women in the broader socialist movement to incorporate the gains made by the feminist tradition in the postwar era (Vogel, 2013). Their belief was that one could not adequately address class-based forms of oppression without also understanding the different roles assigned to the genders in capitalist society. Much of the early inspiration for this scholarly intervention came from Engels’ *On the Origins of the Family, private Property and the State*, wherein he locates the advent of patrilineal kinship groups in the rise of private property and early capitalist social relations. He says:

> According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other (pp.71-72).

Engels argues that with the rise of private property, men became the sole possessors of wealth, which he sees as a determining factor in the subjugation of women. However, Vogel (2013) argues that Engels goes too far in collapsing women’s subjugation into capitalist logics, rather than delineating prior forms of male domination and patriarchy that were transposed to capitalist relations. Engels’ treatment sees
overcoming sexual discrimination as inextricably bound up with the class struggle and thus subsumes the former into the latter. Nonetheless, his contribution to this realm of inquiry was significant for its recognition of the bifurcation between a male-dominated productive realm of work and a feminized reproductive domain.

Embedded in the delineation between productive and reproductive work lies a corresponding one between exchange-value and use-value: the former of which carries formal value in capitalist relations while the latter is largely uncompensated. Consigning women disproportionately to the realm of use-value, thus, has the effect of rendering them dependent on male workers operating in the productive economy. Women labor on behalf of male workers: both in terms of reproducing the “laboring body and the laboring subject” (Jarrett, 2016, p.3). Thus, rather than seeing the subjugation of women as unique to capitalism, Marxist feminists, instead, view a particular form of subjugation arising under capitalism, which is the consignment of women to an un- and under-paid function in the generation of capitalist social relations.

The rise of this bifurcation is inextricably wound up with the concomitant rise in private property. Federici (2004) argues that the root cause of this gendered division of labor was the land enclosures running between the 16th and 18th centuries. She holds that the commons, a reproductive site for small-scale agricultural producers, were also a place where women could be independent and socialize. While they still had a power disadvantage vis-à-vis men in earlier times, this was “tempered by the fact that they had access to the commons . . . while in the new capitalist regime women themselves became the commons, as their work was defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations” (Federici, 2004, p.97).
Existing outside of the realm of the market, however, does not mean that domestic work is not essential to the functioning of capitalism. For one, it frees the male worker from domestic duties, in order that he can sell his labor-power, which some scholars argue is tantamount to the generation of commodity value in its own right, as it allows man “to earn enough for a woman to reproduce him as labor power” (Dalla Costa & James, 1975, p. 34). Fortunati (1995) goes even further, arguing that reproductive work is, in fact, productive, because not only does it produce labor power, but it also generates surplus-value (though not in exchange-value form). However, in contradistinction, Vogel (2013) argues that it is better to think in terms of domestic labor as producing use-value. Her intervention is to instead situate domestic labor within the broader category of necessary labor, arguing that Marx neglected the domestic component thereof. Her rationale is that domestic labor allows the commodities purchased by a man’s wage to be used: in the form of preparing raw food items for as a meal, as one example.

Regardless of whether one situates domestic labor in the realm of use-value or in the commodity-producing realm of labor-power, the commonality is in seeing domestic work as essential for the proper functioning of capitalism. As Jarrett (2016) notes, the family is part of the capitalist superstructure alongside education and other cultural institutions that serve to legitimate and naturalize existing social relations. She contends that capitalism has always needed certain conditions satisfied in order to function: a society that has subjects ready and willing to work where they are needed. In discussing how gender relations figure in the process of satisfying these conditions, Vogel (2013) explains:

For [a] class-society to survive, an exploitable labor-force must always be available to perform surplus-labor. Workers, however, do not live forever; they
suffer wear and tear and death, and must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labor-power. Where replacement is through generational reproduction, the fact that human beings fall into two distinct biological groups, women and men, comes into play. Women’s somewhat diminished capacity to work during the child-bearing period potentially creates a contradiction for the ruling class. Out of the class-struggle over resolving this contradiction, a wide variety of forms of reproduction of labor-power has [sic] developed in the course of history. In virtually all cases, they entail men’s greater responsibility for provision of material means of subsistence, women greater responsibility for the ongoing tasks of necessary labor, and institutionalized forms of male domination over women. While exceptions exist . . . the historical legacy remains one that has been characterized, for better or worse, as patriarchal. (pp.154-155)

Nonetheless, the advantage that men have traditionally held through their dominance of productive work is not absolute. Fortunati (1995) notes that there is a humanizing element to reproductive work, which she argues serves to compensate for the alienating and dehumanizing nature of productive work. The sociality of home life gives workers the illusion that they are more than their labor-power, i.e. their commodity form. Meanwhile, she notes that that women have increasingly entered the productive realm in recent decades, which has resulted in them devoting less of their time to housework while increasingly paying others to fill in: something of a defeat for capitalists. Nonetheless, women still spend over two hours more per day on domestic work than men (Jarrett, 2016). As such, the entry into the productive workforce has not broken the chains disproportionately connecting women to reproductive work, though the shift has most certainly had implications on the stability of the gendered division of labor as a mechanism of control and legitimation of the existing social order.

At the same time, it is worth noting that a shift in the other direction has occurred, with men increasingly working in the immaterial economy, as the autonomist Marxists have stressed in their thinking (Fortunati, 2007; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004; Jarret, 2016).
They argue that this process is informed by the ever-increasing complexity of the workforce in a globalized economy, which expands the need for myriad service workers and specialists to coordinate business functions across international boundaries (Fortunati, 2007; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004). While traditional productive work has not vanished, autonomists argue that there has been a qualitative shift in labor toward the immaterial realm, which is to say that the leading edge of social relations and their attendant contradictions have moved in that direction (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004).

I take the autonomists’ argument one step further, by contending that the rise in the significance of immaterial labor has concomitantly served to heighten the importance of the educational realm – and other feminized domains of work - as a central site of contestation. First and foremost, this is because neoliberal reformers have traditionally singled out education as a place for attacks. As Apple (1986, 1995) underscores, and as I mentioned in the previous chapters of Part 1, neoliberal governance routinely exports blame for economic and social problems to the educational realm. This tendency has, in turn, been the impetus for the reforms that have played a large role in provoking the teachers’ movements that are the focus of this study. Moreover, those reforms have mobilized patriarchal logics that see teaching as a logical target because of the largely female workforce in place.

**Professional Autonomy and its Contradictions**

The large-scale entry of women into the teaching workforce in the United States and other western countries began in earnest during the mid-19th century, owing to a
composite of economic and cultural factors. As far as economic forces go, there were both demand-side and supply-side forces pulling women into the profession. In the former case, rapid population expansion during this period coupled with the growth of a public commitment to universal education created an explosion in teaching opportunities. Meanwhile, on the supply side, this period was marked by the rapid expansion in the education of young women, giving them the requisite qualifications in a period where the profession came under increasing standardization (a factor that led to teaching being less attractive to many men at the time) (Apple, 1986; Strober & Tyack, 1980). At the same time, women were categorically excluded from working in other professional domains at the time, such as business and commerce: domains that men were then entering in large numbers (Strober & Tyack, 1980).

Meanwhile, teaching work was seen as consistent with the Victorian cult of domesticity that defined women’s lives in that era. It was not too distant a departure from housework to teaching in the eyes of those advocating the femininization of the profession, including reformers like Catharine Beecher and Horace Mann, who argued that the nurturing skills that made women good mothers would transfer well to education (Strober & Tyack, 1980; Vaughn-Roberson, 1992). Strober and Tyack (1980) summarize this sentiment:

Victorian ideology about women's place made positive use of sex-typing to encourage women to enter teaching as an occupation and appealed to employers not wanting to undermine the family but wishing cheap and efficient teachers. Since the presumed goal of most women was marriage and child raising, teaching offered important status re-sources to women from families of modest but respectable background, for it was a middle-class occupation that was presumed to make women more eligible as wives and mothers. To women from families of higher status, teaching was one of the few occupations widely distributed geographically and acceptable for respectable young women. At worst, it did not imply the potential loss of standing inherent in factory work in most places or,
almost everywhere, in domestic service (the other two prime job alternatives for women). (pp.496-497)

The prevailing ethos of the time also held that teaching kept with women’s altruistic tendencies more than other paid work, which “degraded women and corrupted their moral character” (Carter, 1980, p.124). Catharine Beecher (1846) embodied this sentiment in her entreaty calling for “Christian females” to work “not for money, nor influence, nor for honor, not for ease, but with the simple, single purpose of doing good” (p.23). The practical effect of these calls to enter the profession on altruistic ground was to place downward pressure on the wages of female teachers, given that teachers were supposed to be motivated by a sense of service to God and community, not their financial compensation (Carter, 1990). As a result, women were paid substantially less than their male counterparts until the early 20th century. Despite calls for equal wages, school boards of the era were reluctant to approve the significant spending hikes that would be necessary to eliminate the pay gap. Meanwhile, they were averse to cutting male teacher wages because men could always find better paying jobs elsewhere, and they were seen as playing a valuable role as role models for male students and as disciplinarians and administrators (Carter, 1990). Nonetheless, the low wages ultimately stoked contradictions, as many women struggled to realize the image of bourgeois femininity animating the domestic ideal of that era, which ultimately led to the departure from the profession of many women from wealthier families, especially as opportunities began to open elsewhere in the early 20th century (Carter, 1990).

Nonetheless, a gendered division of labor in education persists to this day. While the pay disparity is not what it once was, men are disproportionately represented the
higher one goes in the educational hierarchy, especially at the level of district leadership (Apple & Jungck, 1990; Superville, 2016). Superville (2016) provides this instructive breakdown:

Even though K-12 education is largely a female enterprise, men dominate the chief executive's office in the nation's nearly 14,000 districts, numbers that look especially bleak given that the pool of talent is deep with women. Women make up 76 percent of teachers, 52 percent of principals, and 78 percent of central-office administrators, according to federal data and the results of a recent national survey. Yet they account for less than a quarter of all superintendents, according to a survey conducted this summer by AASA, the School Superintendents Association. But that number represents improvement since 2000, when 13 percent were women.

As referenced earlier, the dynamic that emerges out of this division of labor is one of male managers implementing top-down reforms upon a female-dominated workforce (Apple, 1986; Altenbaugh, 1990). Moreover, teaching has always been singled out for administrative oversight and Taylorist mechanisms of control. As part of the zeitgeist of scientific management and efficiency in the early 20th century, school systems developed district bureaucracies to micromanage their school systems, which had the net effect of reducing the decision-making role of teachers in the educational process, on the one hand, while also reducing education policy largely to questions of cost, with an emphasis on keeping teacher wages low (Altenbaugh, 1990). As neo-Taylorist policies were applied under the rubric of neoliberalism, these mechanisms have become more thoroughgoing and the stakes have gotten higher.

However, Apple (1986) notes that, in the earlier days of these bureaucratic interventions from above, many teachers saw the reforms as helping professionalize their work. The standardization and rationalization accompanying outside reforms were often perceived as factors contributing to the legitimation of their work. This response is
especially understandable, when one considers that women have traditionally been situated in workplaces more susceptible to proletarianization, including housework, clerical work and other service work, which has resulted in a tendency to embrace professionalism as a defense mechanism (Apple, 1986). Thus, a contradiction emerges between autonomy and professionalism in the lives of women workers. The reforms injecting greater professional standards (or at least the appearance thereof) into their work tends to come in the form of a patriarchal hierarchy: male reformers and administrators dictating the working lives of the female majority teaching corps. Many women, eager to be accepted as legitimate members of the professional workforce, embraced the reforms despite the larger paternalistic social structure around them.

However, there was never a time where all teachers passively accepted the dictates from above. Altenbaugh (1990) notes: “A few resisted, many acquiesced, and others collectively asserted themselves” (p.169). As teachers’ unions were established through the course of the early 20th century, the numbers of those resisting began steadily increasing. Fittingly for the purposes of this project, one of the first noteworthy voices of militant resistance emerged out of Chicago in the form of Margaret Haley, a representative with the Chicago Teachers’ Federation and subsequent co-founder of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). At the 1904 gathering of the National Education Association (NEA), she condemned “factory-izing education,” and drew linkages between the treatment faced by teachers and that experienced by those working manual labor positions (Carter, 1990). In addressing the top-down control instituted on teaching, she declared:

The individuality of the teacher and her power of initiative are thus destroyed and the result is courses of study, regulations, and equipment which the teachers have
had no voice in selecting, which often have no relation to the children’s needs, and which prove a hindrance instead of a help in teaching.

For her, these interventions failed to provide for what she saw as the principal objective of the education system: “to preserve and develop the democratic ideal” (Carter, 1990). She was effectively presaging the battle lines that would become ever more vivid a century later: the gulf between an instrumentalist, rationalizing view of education on the one hand, and the Deweyan view on the other hand, with its emphasis on education as a mechanism for cultivating a robust citizenry. At the same time, she represented perhaps the most radical example of the break that had occurred with the Victorian cult of domesticity that reigned over the teaching profession over much of the previous half century. While she retained the altruistic notion that her work as serving a vital social function, she rejected the notion that this function could be delivered absent a workforce operating with autonomy and dignity.

Meanwhile, among the more politically moderate and conservative sectors of the profession, the mindset shifted from that of “altruistic social servant to the socially-conscious but fiscally-concerned worker” (Carter, 1990, p. 136). As opportunities slowly began to open elsewhere for women, they began considering the economic implications of teaching work for themselves and their family and began weighing that consideration against the altruistic call to duty (Carter, 1990). They now behaved far more like their male counterparts engaged in manual labor: bargaining for better conditions, making demands of their employers and lawmakers, and demonstrating willingness to leave for greener pastures elsewhere when possible.

Women were originally drawn into the profession via a cult of domesticity that emphasized the altruistic mission of the métier: a logic that would transfer to subsequent
movements within the teaching rank via an embrace of the notion that education serves a higher purpose in society than reformers allow with their “factory-ization” of schools. The early noises of protest by the likes of Margaret Haley presaged what would come over a century later, with a still-majority female teaching corps facing off against neo-Taylorist mechanisms of management and control promulgated as part of the neoliberal offensive of the last 50 years.

**Teachers as a Contradictory Class**

Despite this project being largely grounded in a critical, Marxist theoretical foundation, I have not yet specifically addressed class dynamics separate from their manifestation in gender. The reason for this elision, thus far, is that teachers occupy a contradictory class position in society: existing between the “petty bourgeoisie” and the “working-class” (Apple, 1986; Wright, 1980). As such, the class dynamics are not as neatly bifurcated as they are in struggles in industrial workplaces between an ownership class that commands capital and a working-class commanded by capital. Moreover, education largely exists in the public domain, so that the vectors of control between ownership and workers is not as direct as it is in other workplaces. Instead, the forces of domination and control operate indirectly, through deliberative mechanisms in which teachers retain a good degree of autonomy. Furthermore, there are other sociological factors that figure more prominently in educational issues, such as the issues of representation around gender discussed thus far in this chapter.

All of that said, there are good reasons to discuss class as it pertains to struggles in the educational sector. First and foremost, the condition of teaching is quite often
indicative of conditions in the broader workforce, and the struggles ongoing in the educational domain are reflective of struggles elsewhere. In this respect, the fate of teachers tacks with broader economic realities. Education does not exist apart from the economic and political domains, but is, rather, a reflection of those domains, and, by extension, the forces and relations that animate them. In sum, I believe that the teachers’ movements of the last decade allow us to glimpse broader societal conflicts. The reason for this is that education is reproductive. However, unlike other critical scholars, such as Althusser (1971), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Bernstein (1990), I do not argue that education simply reproduces the ruling ideology. Rather, I endorse the view of Apple (1986, 1995), Gramsci (1971), and Carnoy and Levin (1985) that education “is the product of conflict between the dominant and the dominated” (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). In other words, education is one of the key arenas in which a hegemonic compromise equilibrium is reached, and, as such, it embodies the tensions and contradictions present in society writ large, while also being a place where new tensions emerge. In this regard, education is where economic structure meets cultural practice in the dialectical interplay between elite ideology and popular contestation.

**Rationalization and Proletarianization**

While one could employ the “middle-class” moniker to describe the living conditions of teachers, that does not provide information on the relational characteristics of teachers in contemporary capitalist society. For the purposes of this project, it is far more instructive to inspect their contradictory presence in terms of how they relate to other relevant members of society. On the one hand, teachers share features in common
with the working-class, especially in lean times when education is placed on the chopping block and subjected to the type of reforms discussed in the opening chapters of this dissertation. On the other hand, teachers occupy what Wright (1980) refers to as a “semi-autonomous” domain of employment wherein they are afforded “a lot of freedom as to how you do (their) work” and the ability to “make a lot of decisions on (their) own” (p.185). In the surveys conducted in Wright’s study, teachers also tended to self-identify as managers, given their supervision of pupils, though he understandably places them in a different category than other supervisors. In describing the contradictory role of teachers, Apple (1986) says:

They share the interests of both the petty bourgeoisie and the working class. Hence, when there is a fiscal crisis in which many teachers are faced with worsening working conditions, layoffs and even months without being paid – as has been the case in a number of urban areas in the United States – and when their labor is restructured so that they lose control, it is possible that these contradictory interests will move closer to those of other workers . . . who have historically been faced with the use of similar procedures by capital and the state. (p. 32).

In the neoliberal epoch, the proletarianization of teachers has accompanied the heightened rationalization of teaching via successive reforms that have stripped the profession of much of the autonomy that would otherwise position educators more toward the petty bourgeoisie in classification. For teachers, the stressor associated with neo-Taylorism comes through the consequences of poor showings on standardized test results, which can result in dismissal of teachers via the mandates of former President Obama’s landmark Race to the Top legislation. In some cases, entire schools are designated failing, so that the pain is spread out over the broader community. Meanwhile, as discussed in Chapter 2, teachers have been routinely targeted with shaming rhetoric in
both the political arena and mass media, as tropes about lazy and ineffectual teachers have circulated and been recontextualized as political rhetoric and dogma that treats teachers as the source of the country’s economic problems: effectively displacing crises from the economic to the educational domain (Apple, 1986, 1995).

Economic structure figures in educational practice through the elite political project of blaming and shaming teachers for phenomena largely out of their control. The shift from Taylorist systems of rationalization to lean production was legitimated by a larger rhetorical intervention about the need for to be more economically competitive vis-à-vis the industrial dynamism witnessed in Japan and Germany in the 70s and 80s. In Chapter 3, I highlighted how these discourses about competitiveness began circulating in the political arena during the Reagan administration following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by education czar T.H. Bell, an alarmist screed placing the blame for the country’s flagging economic competitiveness on the failures of its public schools. These discourses served to help naturalize the resulting test-driven pedagogy privileging technical knowledge. The rationalization that occurred in the educational systems was not always effective – indeed, there has been marked little change in the overall competitiveness of this country’s school systems in terms of achievement and aptitude compared to other major countries – but that was never the real point. This is because the project of rationalization has always been largely ideological in nature. The principal purpose of the reform movement has always been about legitimating the wider political assault on teaching and education, as Apple (1986) relates:

> While these initial attempts at rationalizing teaching and curricula did not always produce the results that were anticipated by their academic, industrial, and governmental proponents, they did other things that were, and are, of considerable import. The situation is actually quite similar to the effects of the use of
Tayloristic management strategies in industry. As a management technology for deskilling workers and separating conception from execution, Taylorism was less than fully successful. It often generated slow-downs and strikes, exacerbated tensions, and created new forms of overt and covert resistance. Yet, its ultimate effect was to legitimate a particular ideology of management and control both to the public and to employers and workers. Even though it did not succeed as a set of techniques, it ushered in and finally brought acceptance of a larger body of ideological practices to deskill pink-, white- and blue-collar workers and to rationalize and intensify their labor.

This too was one of the lasting consequences of these earlier curriculum ‘reform’ movements. While they also did not completely transform the practice of teaching . . . they legitimated both new forms of control and greater state intervention using industrial and technical models and brought about a new generation of more sophisticated attempts at overcoming teacher ‘resistance.’ Thus, this new generation of techniques that are being instituted in so many states in the United States and elsewhere currently – from systematic integration of testing, behavioral goals and curriculum, competency-based instruction and prepackaged curricula, to management by objectives, and so forth – has not sprung out of nowhere, but, like the history of Taylorism, has grown out of the failures, partial successes, and resistances that accompanied the earlier approaches to control. (pp. 39-40)

In other words, the mechanisms of control implemented in the educational sector – and other domains, as well – have more to do with ideological legitimation than with actually rendering the affected sector more efficient. The objective was to naturalize the worldview undergirding these rationalizations: that ineffectual, inept teachers are to blame for economic problems and that the solution is market discipline. This ideology narrowly sees the purpose of education as cultivating workers, and, specifically, the technical knowledge that reformers have tended to privilege with the metric-driven evaluation regimes they have implemented (Apple, 1995).

**Struggles Both Old and New**

The fact that primary and secondary teachers are overwhelmingly women is critical in understanding why education has so frequently been singled out for these types
of neo-Taylorist reforms. Class and gender are bound up with one another when it comes
to the treatment of educators, in much the same way that economic structure bears on
cultural practice more generally. In order to understand the tendency of teachers to be
proletarianized during times of cutbacks in public services, one must also understand the
gendered division of labor that has historically existed in capitalistic societies wherein
women have been disproportionately relegated to the un- and under- compensated sector
of care work. The subsequent entry of women into teaching work has always been
fraught with conflict between the feminized teaching corps and the majority-male
managers in administration and leadership (Apple, 1986). The practices of discrimination
and marginalization present in the cultural arena and the forces of domination and control
that prevail in the economic domain are commingled in the educational domain.
Understanding education’s political battles necessitates an appreciation of both sides to
this social dynamic.

Not only does the current wave of teachers’ movement emerge out of the crisis of
neoliberal capitalism, but it also descends from over a century of cultural struggle of
women workers entering the workforce and fighting for dignity and autonomy in their
professional lives. As women have entered other professional domains at the same time,
they have gained more leverage with which to bargain, at the same time that the
proliferation of teachers’ unions throughout the country has given them institutional
strength with which to wage their battles. Nonetheless, recent reforms severely curtailing
the right of these unions to collectively bargain and stripping teachers of hard-won
autonomy have set teachers back in terms of many of the gains they made in early part of
the 20th century, effectively opening old wounds in the educational domain.
The opening of these wounds is one of the principal factors motivating the teachers’ movement of the last decade. However, I also contend that another significant factor is that education has become a more important cultural institution in an age where immaterial labor has become ever more central in the social organization of countries in the economic core. The locus of struggle has, likewise, shifted in a decidedly immaterial direction, with teachers taking center stage. Much of the focus of neoliberal reforms has been on control and management of people and message: of injecting market discipline into the psyche of the nation while legitimating that discipline through the dominant logics circulating in the cultural terrain, most notably in the realm of education. Education has been singled out as a domain in which to activate the evaluative and monitorial mechanisms of control precisely because of its obvious importance in the battle over ideas. It is, thus, little surprise that it has also become one of the central sites of political struggle at a time where neoliberalism’s guiding logics have fallen into crisis.
Unit 2: Empirical Investigations in the Circuits of Communication

Chapter 5: Teachers in Their Own Words: Making Our Unions Better

This chapter inspects the motivations behind teachers’ participation in the nationwide uprising of 2018-2019. Mixing descriptive history with firsthand interviews that I conducted with teacher activists in the four major states that saw uprisings in 2018 “Red State Rebellion” – Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona and West Virginia - I argue that the broader teachers’ movement has sought to correct perceived shortcomings with existing union structures, and in so doing, they have pushed the unions’ organizing model increasingly away from the dominant business unionism model of organizing to a model embracing at least some characteristics of “social movement unionism.” I, further, argue that this tactical shift in organizing was a necessary response to the limitations posed by political and structural limitations on union activity in school districts throughout the country.

In telling this story, I interweave a descriptive history of the process of neoliberal education reforms with results from first-hand interviews conducted between 2020-2021 with 25 teacher activists. The interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling, in which I started by identifying active members of Facebook groups associated with each state-based movement and, in the course of interviewing those individuals, requested that they recommend other members for interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, as I used a set of 10 questions to help guide the interview (included in the Appendix), but I would then allow the interview subjects to move the discussion to other topics that they deemed important. General topics of discussion included their personal
motivation for participating the movement, what issues they found most important, how they felt their state’s movement fit in with the larger national movement, how they felt the movement impacted the broader public perception on teachers and education, and how they would define the ideal role of education in society and how this might differ from the current role it plays.

**Central Arguments**

Over the 40-50 years of neoliberal retrenchment preceding this movement, teachers’ unions moved in the direction of a business unionism model, wherein they narrowly focus efforts on bargaining for the best contract for members’ that is, without contesting the larger social issues within which they are operating (McCartin et al, 2020; Moody, 1997; Strassfeld & Strassfeld, 2020; Weiner, 2012). This limitation in scope was driven, in part, by a broader tactical shift on the part of unions across all sectors operating in a political climate that became decidedly less favorable to left-wing militancy, but it was also driven by formal restrictions implemented through legislative action throughout the country (Moody, 1997; Strassfeld & Strassfeld, 2020). Specifically, legislative bodies have enacted significant restrictions on what kinds of issues that teachers’ union are legally permitted to bargain over – usually narrowly related to compensation – while undermining union power with passage of so-called “right to work” legislation in 28 states. The subsequent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Janus vs. AFSCME, Council 31* effectively extended “right to work” logics beyond the 28 states that formally passed such legislation by declaring fees from non-members to public employee unions unconstitutional.
I argue that the teachers’ movement of the last ten years has contested this predominance of business unionism by transforming the organizational and communicative model with which they have engaged the larger publics involved in education: not just other teachers, but students, parents and community members. This change of communicative practice has involved the construction of new networked counter-publics to discuss issues and advocate around them in ways that the existing union architecture was failing to. With business unionism, the rank-and-file is rarely consulted upon or mobilized to action, which significantly weakens its collective organizing power. Through a combination of organizing at the shop level, the recruitment of school liaisons, and the deployment of the networking affordances of social media, teacher activists have been able to build networks that, at times, have been larger than what the formal union had at its disposal. Meanwhile, teacher activists have networked with the general public including parents and other community members in an effort to connect education related issues to larger issues around social inequities as they manifest in the educational domain.

Of course, changes in communicative practice also bear on organizational dynamics. The inclusion of broader publics within the communicative orbit, in turn, has been accompanied by a shift in union structure, and is ultimately “interwoven with the question of union democracy and leadership accountability” (Moody, 1997, p. 60). More engagement with the community also typically involves greater reliance on rank-and-file members to do the recruitment and outreach, rather than hired organizers and bureaucrats (Moody). However, it is important to recognize that this phenomenon is not entirely new: if anything, it is a return to the organizational practice that was dominant prior to the rise
to prominence of business unionism during the neoliberal epoch (Moody; McAlavey, 2019).

This reversion to broader community engagement has, in turn, permitted union activists to address a range of issues outside of traditional bread and butter union demands. Among the issues advocated in this framework of “organizing for the common good” include increased levels of education funding; hiring more support staff and mental health professionals; opposing planned school closures and the concomitant shift to so-called “choice” schools such as charter schools; and demanding that attention be given to infrastructural issues such as decrepit facilities and inadequate textbooks and supplies.

These communicative and organization “fixes” to the prevailing union model are largely in line with the concept of “social movement unionism” (SMU), which Moody (1997) defines as such:

Unions take an active lead in the streets, as well as in politics. They ally with other social movements but provide a class vision and content that make for a stronger glue than that which usually holds electoral or temporary coalitions together. That content is not simply the demands of the movements, but the activation of the mass of union members as the leaders of the charge—those who in most cases have the greatest social and economic leverage in capitalist society. Social-movement unionism implies an active strategic orientation that uses the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited, generally organized workers, to mobilize those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization: the poor, the unemployed, the casualized workers, the neighborhood organizations. (p.59)

I contend that this pivot in the direction of SMU has been a necessary and inevitable response to conditions created in the educational sector through the decades-long period of neoliberal policymaking. Above, I briefly referenced some of these policies as they pertained to severely restricting the scope of what issues teachers’ unions could legally bargain around, essentially formalizing a limited version of business unionism in
practice. At the same time, reformers enacted myriad policies that expanded the number of issues directly impacting the lived realities of teachers and students. These include the legalization of so-called choice schools – both charters and voucher programs in which public funds are used for non-traditional programs – as well as the policies of neglect that stripped schools of requisite resources like school aids, nurses, and infrastructure, while at the same time tying the fate of schools and teachers to evaluative metrics, such as the results of standardized test scores. This combination of narrowing the range of bargainable issues coupled with the expanding scope of policy bearing on teachers led them to have little choice but to act outside of the prescribed bounds: by engaging in illegal wildcat strikes, on the one hand, and by organizing amongst the broader community of people impacted by these reforms.

I, further, argue that the CTU has played a central role in this process in that it was the first major union to undergo this transformation, and subsequently inspired teacher activists in various locales involved in the rolling uprisings of 2018-19. As such, the story of Chicago as a microcosm of this broader struggle is absolutely vital: in terms of the history of neoliberal reforms and the history of the CTU’s resistance efforts. While the rise of the militant CORE slate to the leadership of the CTU has been touched upon in prior chapters, I will revisit that history here with greater focus on the organizational and communicative dynamics that animated that movement, with an eye toward demonstrating how CORE has (both directly and indirectly) served as a catalyst for broader sectoral change ongoing in the educational domain.
Chicago: Crucible of Reform and Resistance

As discussed in Chapter 2, Chicago became the testing grounds for the neoliberal education reform movement as the city grappled with the twin threats of white flight and de-industrialization beginning in the 1970s and 80s. The formalization of the reforms started when Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was placed under Mayor Richard Daley’s control in 1995, who then appointed Paul Vallas and subsequently Arne Duncan (later the Education Secretary under President Obama) to the newly-created CEO position (Lipman, 2011). This restructuring permitted more fluid streamlining of urban education policy with the mandates of the federal “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) law and latterly the “Race to the Top” (RTTP) legislation and the city’s broader turn to financialization discussed in the previous chapter.

It is out of this crucible of the financialization of urban policy, and its targeting of schools and teachers in disadvantaged communities, that the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) reform slate won the union’s leadership election in 2010. Brogan (2014) describes the caucus as being composed of anyone “from those who were relatively new to activism or involvement in the union, including some who never saw themselves as “political,” to others who were members of socialist groups like Solidarity, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), unaffiliated radicals of different stripes, as well as those teachers interested in progressive/alternative pedagogy, many of whom were members of a smaller social justice organization of educators called Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ).” They ultimately prevailed in the 2010 election against United Progressive Caucus (UPC), a previously militant slate that had organized several strikes
up until 1987, after which it entered into a more conciliatory relationship with the city’s Democratic leadership (Utricht, 2014; Brogan 2014).

One tactic that was a critical component of CORE’s early communication strategy was its organization of reading groups among members and community groups. These forums provided a mechanism by which activists could make connections between the issues facing teachers and schools with broader neoliberal reforms in the affected communities. Moreover, they permitted CORE to counter the scapegoating rhetoric of reformers, while also cultivating community alliances (Brogan, 2014). This practice continued in 2012 as the strike neared, during which they organized teach-ins to educate community members on the reasons for the strike, while countering unsympathetic mainstream media framing of their organizing efforts (Brogan, 2014).

The emphasis on sharing information continued in the 2018 strike wave, most notably in Arizona, where the substance of teach-ins was now oriented on replicating what the CTU did in 2012. For that purpose, they turned to How to Jumpstart Your Union, a publication chronicling the CTU organizing efforts published by Labor Notes, a media organization focusing on union activity. Derek Harris, a band teacher that was one of the original participants in the Arizona movement, says, “A lot of us read this book, which is a chronology of the Chicago teachers union strike and how they built power up. It talks about the founding of core and how they got people put into positions of power, how they handled the media, how they dealt with the city government and the school district and stuff like that.”

Another of CORE’s legacies was its meticulous construction of coalitions with a range of neighborhood groups, including the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM)
and Stand Up! Chicago, as a vehicle through which to resist slated school closures (Brogan, 2014; McCartin et al, 2020). These structural changes have largely been a response to the perception among CORE members that the previous slate was too top-down, and too narrowly focused on lobbying elected officials, rather than engaging in popular protest. As such, they view the community outreach as a means of reinforcing, rather than de-prioritizing, rank-and-file interests, insofar as it broadens the pool from which they are able to mobilize support (Brogan, 2014).

Moreover, this organizing tactic resulted in a markedly altered structural relationship to the society in which the CTU is embedded. Rather than treating themselves as a sort of specialized professional class of workers, they see their movement in terms as one of social justice, with a scope broadened from the school to the city, consistent with the characteristics of “social movement unionism” laid out above (Brogan, 2013). Other aspects to this restructuring include more rigorous cultivation of rank-and-file organizing and training, development of a department and school representative structure, and a broader united front alignment through the cultivation of alliances with other progressive forces in the city. In recognizing that every iteration of neoliberal policy is intertwined by its system of embedded logics, they also understand that their activism must necessarily be oriented around this systemic level.

**Teacher Militancy in the Red State Rebellion**

CORE activists within the CTU emphasized recruitment of rank-and-file members to become more involved in decision-making through on-site recruitment efforts. One such member, Rebecca Garelli, was recruited out of the local Chicago school
she worked at in 2010 by a member of the steering committee for the union’s black caucus. While she was previously involved with the local school council, she had never been involved in union politics before then. She subsequently relocated to the Phoenix area and ultimately found herself as a centerpiece of organizing efforts in Arizona’s #redfored movement, in which tens of thousands of teachers participated in walkouts, marches and sickouts in what became the largest teacher strike in that state’s history.

The insight she brought from her experience in Chicago was invaluable in teaching her the importance of building alliances within the community as part of the united front organizing tactic. In discussing her perception about the relationship of schools to the broader community, she says:

I think of the role of school as a community hub. And maybe that's from where I'm from in Chicago. And maybe that's, that's the types of schools I've worked in, in title one communities. They’re the soul and the heart of the community. They are what drive the community to uplift itself.

And so broadly speaking, that's how I view that role of education. The school is the hub of the community. Not only do we educate, we provide things that they may or may not have and then uplift them. If they, they there's, there's a need, we fill that need, whether it's language, resources, tools, knowledge, technology, internet.

That's how I see schools. It's not just you go to school, you get an education. It's . . . I'm embedded in this, this fabric of this community. And we all help each other and work to uplift us all. So to me, it's, it's that cornerstone of our democratic society.

This ethos stands in stark contrast to an existing union structure – the Arizona Education Association (AEA) – that had become largely confined to the world of lobbying on behalf of its members. Harris describes how, while the relationship between activists and the union largely remained amicable in Arizona, the latter was of little help when it came to building the kind of foundation that CORE established in Chicago over
several years. While there were a few staffers with some logistical knowledge on how to run a strike, they did not have the more expansive skill set in building strong community connections.

Most activists involved in the 2018 walkouts characterized their relationship to their unions in similar terms as Harris: cordial, even if many teachers had grown frustration with the severe limitations and passivity of their unions. However, one prominent figure involved with the Oklahoma movement, Larry Cagle, struck a brashly antagonistic posture in his depiction of the role of the major union organizations in this struggle:

We were coordinating without the union . . . The union did not support, and that's not just a local statement. That is a national statement. The national unions did not see this coming . . . The American Federation of Teachers did not see this wave coming. And as West Virginia rolled out. They wanted to get this wave under control. As they saw Oklahoma coming forward, the unions really pushed back hard. They did not want this to happen. And they said to me explicitly, do you have any idea how much this will cost us a day to have a union action?

He is adamant that, despite formal gestures of support from the national union leadership for the teacher walkouts, that they were acting reluctantly. He also assures me that if they followed their union’s lead, teachers would never have realized success in securing a pay raise via an increase in the gross production tax on oil and gas revenue.

Likewise, Harris feels that Arizona teachers could have accomplished more with their efforts if they had the time or capacity to build the deep community structures that were lacking with the pre-existing union organization. While teachers won a 20% increase in pay over the three-year period beginning after the strike in addition to guarantees of increased education funding, though they have not been able to raise the array of other issues – such as challenges to charter authorizations and school closures –
that CORE has organized around. Moreover, even after the 20% increase, Arizona’s level of teacher pay remains among the lowest in the country, according to a report by Arizona School Personnel Administration Association.

Indeed, most of the individual 2018-2019 uprisings focused attention on teacher pay, pensions and education funding: other issues were largely at the periphery. Nonetheless, like the CTU strikes of 2012 and 2019, the “red state rebellion” uprisings of 2018 framed their movement in terms of the common good as well: making sure to align the fate of teachers and students with the broader community. The chart below summarizes the gains realized in each of the locations engaged in strike activity. Teacher pay raises were passed in West Virginia, North Carolina and Oklahoma. Meanwhile, in Kentucky, teachers successfully fought off an attempt to overhaul their pension system by moving from a defined benefit system to a hybrid model.
The latter was infamously packaged into the sewer bill in the 11th hour discussed at the beginning of the introductory chapter: legislative trickery that drove thousands of Kentucky educators into the streets, even in the most conservative parts of the state. The fact that teachers had such success in a highly red state like Kentucky points to another shortcoming of how business unionism has often been conducted in such environments.

Sarah Gump, an ESL teacher in Madison County, makes precisely this point, noting that the Kentucky Education Association (KEA) operates under a tight political calculus.
whereby they assume they have to be more tepid in their activism when Republicans are a dominant force in politics. She is also highly involved with SOS Kentucky, a group that has helped to successfully fight back efforts to implement charter schools in Kentucky, which remains one of only seven states without any charter schools. For her, public schools are vital community centers, and she believes people across the political spectrum see them that way, as she enumerates the various roles they play in society:

I think [education] provides the foundation for having a productive life as an individual, as a citizen, as a future leader. I think, here in Kentucky, we're a poor state generally, but it's amazing the things our schools do. I mean, our schools fed people all during COVID . . . The family resource centers and our schools help people pay light bills and make sure people have clothes. And some schools . . . provide a lot of services to the community, whether it's health-related or laundry or social skills and counseling. And I just feel like, especially in Kentucky, they're just the foundation of the community as a major employer.

This discussion illuminates the ways schools serve as the nuclei of communities, even when the extra effort is not made to forge connections in the manner of CORE activists. It also serves as an instructive commentary on the cross-ideological appeal of public schools as bedrocks of the community.

The last aspect of changing communicative practice characterizing this teachers’ movement – in contradistinction to the practice of prevailing union structures - is the way teacher activists have deployed the technological affordances of social media, especially Facebook, to help grow the networked publics of movement participants. Notwithstanding the various problems with Facebook and its algorithms designed to render behavioral data for advertising sales and prediction software (Zuboff, 2019), it is also a useful tool for connecting like-minded people via groups and for inviting and recruiting interested parties to events. Rebecca Garelli, whose lessons about community
organizing gained in her Chicago days, also witnessed the power in digital organizing, when she started the group “Arizona Teachers United,” and, within two days, it had grown to over 1,500 members. She elaborates:

I wasn’t even a big Facebooker at the time. I’m not like a master Facebooker . . . and I have three little kids at home, tiny kids at the time, and I’m not paying attention to the page and it just exploded. And I’m going, ‘wait a minute!’ And that’s actually where I met Noah Karvelis, Dylan Wagela and Derek Harris . . . and they were kind of the loudest voices.

In short, the Arizona activist core came together via a Facebook group started on something of a whim. As all involved are quick to point out, that Facebook group did not perform any of the legwork involved in building the network of school liaisons, communicating with the news media and planning out the logistics of the various actions they took. Vanessa Arredondo, one of the initial nine core activists involved in organizing the Arizona actions, describes the dynamics of the liaison-building work, in which representatives were recruited at both the school and district level:

We created a Google form and we asked for liaisons for anybody that wanted to be involved and to share information with their staff . . . I then created a list with all the school names and all the districts. And I would highlight this list with whoever had a liaison.

So to this day, I have a lot of people seeing that list and seeing if they know somebody at that school to be able to help them organize and then to work together as a district liaison.

Nonetheless, social media did prove vital in growing the interested audience from which to recruit other participants to assist in everything else that needed to be done. It also helped provide power in numbers beyond what the formal union organizations had, weakened as they were by right to work laws and other legal strictures discussed earlier.
in this chapter. In this regard, Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) lead organizer Larry
Cagle notes, “Our group has 40,000 people in it, but there are only 12,000 union
members, which means we can talk to more teachers than the union ever could.”

At the same time, Facebook allowed individual activists to share stories about
their organizing efforts across their respective states in what amounted to collective acts
of motivation (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5). Seeing what other teacher
activists were doing – in terms of the signs they were making and holding at pickets,
what messages they were communicating, what ideas they had for future organizations –
helped to motivate other supporters in the same Facebook group (be it a statewide group
or a district or county-based group. On this account, Arredondo elaborates:

I remember those first days the group: it just grew by the thousands within the
first week. And it just kept growing and growing and growing. And we had this
platform that allowed us to communicate with, educators across the state. And we
were all came together. We were able to . . . share staff. It was instantly, you
know, by using Facebook live with Kelly and stuff . . . it was huge. People
everywhere, tagging everything that was going on in their districts, seeing what
was happening over here, what they were doing over here, their social media
played.

She also comments on the importance of the discussion page connected to the
movement, wherein teacher activists can have conversations on various issues or tactical
considerations. Other states and municipalities also have separate discussion pages from
the regular group page for that purpose, wherein activists can engage in discussion
without having to commit to a formal in-person meeting, which encourages involvement
from a wider range of the networked counter-public.

**Elite Reformers vs. A Teacher-led Counter-Public**

Forty years after school vouchers were first proposed in Virginia as a way of
circumventing the mandates of desegregation law and 30 years after Chicago became the
testing ground for the larger suite of neoliberal reforms, the contradictions of these policy experiments have bubbled over. Treating education like a commodity creates decidedly more losers than winners: in the form of teachers struggling to survive on some of the lowest wages given to educated people; communities stripped of a local school because it was deemed failing by education policy following the dictates of finance; and students that must commute to schools outside of their community, often to unaccountable charter schools, in order to get an education. The winners are an elite that have amassed a greater share of the pie than they have had since the Gilded Age.

Meanwhile, traditional union structures had proven largely ineffective at countering this assault on K-12 education, due to formal legal restrictions governing what actions they were permitted to take as well as a tactical shift on the part of unions throughout the country to become less militant in the face of the general rightward drift of the country during the neoliberal epoch. Eventually teachers hit their breaking point, and it happened first in the city that was the subject of some of the most aggressive neoliberal policy prescriptions, both in terms of urban development and education. Teachers in Chicago painstakingly built social movement structures around their existing union architecture, in what they saw as an essential extension of the traditional union work. Moreover, they set a model for others to follow that would prove essential when that breaking point was hit in other places. When that time hit, teacher activists would do their best to construct similar counter-publics, both in their school communities and via social media, whose affordances proved helpful in building the connections that activists needed to go above and beyond what their formal union structures were capable of in current conditions.
Chapter 6: Teachers in the Digital Vortex

A Movement Takes Shape

The teachers’ movement of 2018 was not born on Facebook, but without the technological affordances of the world’s largest social media platform, the movement would not have blossomed when it did. The resentment that was brewing in the ranks of the nation’s teacher corps had been building through decades of neoliberal education reforms; however, the fact that the movement exploded when it did, and not years earlier, is attributable to the mass availability of social media as a tool to harness the collective resentment of the ranks of teachers in jurisdictions most adversely impacted by the neoliberal assault on public education.

As elaborated in chapter 5, this movement was, in part, a communicative intervention by individual teacher activists to compensate for perceived shortcomings of their respective unions. These shortcomings, specifically, had to do with limitations on the range of issues the unions were permitted to bargain over, especially around bigger social causes like education equity, school “charterization” and school closures. In that chapter, I argued that teacher activists intervened with new communicative and organizational practices in their unions, aimed at broadening the scope of issues engaged with, while also building networks of liaisons across schools and districts and with community members connected to those individual schools and districts.

In this sense, the teachers’ movement can be seen as something of a “hybrid movement,” analogous to Chadwick’s (2013) concept of a “hybrid media system,” defined as being “built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizational forms –
in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics” (p.4). By extension, one can conceive of a “hybrid movement” as one that embraces logics from older movements as well as those of the digital era. Rather than confining a movement to the narrow domain of one form of media and its associated “repertoire of contention,” the movement engages various tactics from different “repertoires of contention” and makes use of their associated organizational capacities and media practices. Such an approach largely dodges the various problems associated with the fetishization of one form of media and its undergirding logics, as described by Wolfson (2014) with regards to Indymedia, but which could be extended to Occupy and the other “movements of the squares.” The institutional anchor provided by the union organization also helped avoid the problem of ephemerality that has plagued the other movements in this wave of contestation.

In other words, this movement used social media for specific purposes to aid in their communicative and organizational interventions. In this chapter, I inspect these purposes by highlighting the networking affordances of Facebook that teachers employed in their use of Facebook groups associated with their various state and county-level movements. Through an exhaustive investigation of hundreds of Facebook posts, I identify four major categories of purpose: narration/articulation of the cause, mobilization of new supporters, motivation of the existing support base, and discussion of issues and logistics. In fleshing out these categories, I define each one and provide screenshot examples, while also giving tallies of the total number of posts belonging to each category.

While these networking affordances were vital to the movement taking shape when and how it did, I hold that this institutional anchor of the union allowed the
movement to succeed in realizing the type of concrete material gains largely lacking from other movements in this wave. In this vein, the “old” and “new” social movement forms effectively worked in symbiosis. By using Facebook for specific functions that permitted networking across districts and in the communities surrounding the participating schools, while allowing the movement to circumvent some of the legal restrictions placed on union organizations in recent years, the teachers’ movement was able to fill in the advocacy gap left by decades of relative inaction in the face of the flurry of neoliberal reforms and austerity measures.

**Facebook and a New Repertoire of Contention**

Facebook’s power as a tool for social movements is largely explained by its mass popularity, as it has by far the biggest user base of any social media platform in the United States. However, Facebook’s structure, whereby it effectively reinforces strong ties, also informs its utility. Gerbaudo (2012) explains:

What makes this medium so effective for drawing people in, including those with no previous experience of political participation, is the fact that it allows activists to tap into people’s “real” social networks. In general, Facebook is used to mediate one’s relationship to and engagement with a local community of friends and acquaintances . . . In fact, many of those my interviewees interact with on Facebook were indeed their real friends or close acquaintances, rather than “Facebook friends” (in the sense of Facebook-only friends). In this sense, Malcolm Gladwell is partly wrong in asserting that social media allow only for the construction of “weak ties.”

In other words, it is not direct engagement with weak ties that makes Facebook so powerful an organizing tool as much as the access to other people’s strong ties: the fact that you can reach a broad audience through the act of sharing amongst each other’s strong ties. Content can be passed on through a chain of close friendships, until it is
reaching the majority of a given community - such as teachers in a school district - in relatively short order. Previously, connecting with these outer circles for purposes of political organizing was tedious and time-consuming, whereas it can now happen virtually automatically.

Another important facet of organizing via social media is that it insulates people from much of the awkwardness that would normally accompany the act of approaching friends’ friends with political causes. On Facebook, one need not direct any given post at a specific individual, as all content gets incorporated into the newsfeed. Furthermore, all manner of content is commingled in social media feeds, so that there is not a special station for politics and activism. Thus, posts providing information about a teachers’ rally appear in the same stream as everything else. Not only does this contribute to insulating users from the uneasiness they might feel with political posts, but it also helps shield activists from censorship, in what Ethan Zuckerman (2013) refers to as the “cute cat theory” of activism, arguing: “Internet tools designed to let ordinary consumers publish non-political content are often useful for activists because they are difficult for governments to censor without censoring innocuous content” (para. 5).

The drawback of this arrangement is that content is controlled by algorithms designed to privilege content that is profitable by Facebook’s business model, which tends to favor highly emotive content. Nonetheless, Gerbaudo (2012) found Facebook to be a valuable recruitment tool among subjects he interviewed, owing to its capacity to function as “an emotional rallying point around which to condense a common identity capable of assembling symbolically a diverse constituency of dispersed and individualized participants” (p. 145). This “emotional condensation,” as he terms it,
allows for a subsequent pivot to the mobilization in the public squares: a process of “material precipitation from symbolic assemblages to bodily assemblages in public space” (p. 42).

In this view, the square represents both a funneling of various activists into a singular space as well as a projection of the wider movement outward into the general population. For Gerbaudo (2012), the former is critical in effecting the latter. The presence in public parks provides a sight for the broader population to witness as a symbol of struggle: the stage upon which grievances are aired. Moreover, the physical assembly helps to create a sense of camaraderie: that feeling of togetherness that Durkheim calls “collective effervescence,” described by Tufecki (2017) as “that transcendent feeling of being part of something larger than oneself” (p.89). At this stage, activists no longer feel alone in their discontentment with prevailing conditions, connected as they are to a network of disaffection spanning their broader community.

It is at this point that the “Movements of the Squares” have typically encountered their fundamental weakness: a lack of requisite organization to sustain themselves past this initial effervescence. This point is elaborated exhaustively in the literature (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017; Tufecki, 2017; Wolfson 2014), wherein the ephemeral nature of the movements is seen as reflective of an aversion on the part of activists to organizational bureaucracy and hierarchy, animated by an anarchist ethos descended from prior waves of social justice movements (Gerbaudo, 2017; Tufecki, 2017). Others see this tendency as being informed by a sort of technological determinism, in which activists believe that the non-hierarchical organizational form of the media technology will transfer to the movement itself, and ultimately give way to a world more in line with
their anti-authoritarian worldview. The result, according to Wolfson (2014) “is that most contemporary movement-based organizations have weak organizational structures with little collective power because centralized power of any sort is dismissed outright” (p.191).

This problem largely did not befall the teachers’ movement because it benefitted from already existing organizations designed to advocate on their behalf: that is, their unions. Unlike other social movements of the era, the problem for the teachers was not the lack of any such organizations as much as a frustration with how effective those organizations were in the current political climate.

Nonetheless, I still situate this movement within that broader wave of protest. Firstly, I do so because of the “outside-inside” nature of the teachers’ movement – that is, it mobilized support outside of formal union channels so as to change the inner workings thereof – which, I contend, keeps it very much in the spirit of the “Movements of the Squares,” aimed as they were at reclaiming democratic institutions regarded as having been commandeered by elite interests. Gerbaudo (2017) sees this core demand of “popular sovereignty” as aspiring to a “government of and by the people, enshrined in all democratic constitutions, yet too often betrayed by the oligarchic distortions of existing democracies” (p. 63).

He notes the existence of a fundamental tension with the “Movements of the Squares” between its radically horizontal, anarchistic organizing ethos and its desire to work within governing structures through the demand for popular sovereignty. In the case of the teachers’ movement, this tension manifested in the form of conflict within the union between its leadership and the rank-in-file. Even in the case where the union
leadership led the strike effort – that is, in Chicago in 2012 and 2019 - the union was run by a militant slate, The Congress of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE), which came to power on promises of reversing the neoliberal drift of the previous union leadership and the national-level union structures (the two major trade union organizations for teachers, the AFT and the NEA) (Ashby & Bruno; Brogan 2013, 2014; Lipman, 2011). In this sense, CORE is still an outside-inside movement-oriented organization, even if it is situated within the inside of the union machinery at the local level.

In sum, the teachers took action, at least in part, due to a belief that their unions had betrayed them by acquiescing to the decades’ long neoliberal assault on their profession. The example from the Oklahoma Teachers’ United (OTU) page below evinces this phenomenon, as teachers are asked to reject the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leadership’s acquiescence at the bargaining table.
Despite this tension, the existence of this union structure certainly helped the teachers’ movement succeed where its predecessors in this wave of protest fell short: in realizing demonstrable gains through engagement with governing structures. While all of the various state and local efforts fell short of their demands, they, nonetheless, managed substantial concessions that exceeded what would have been possible without the movement.
The second feature of the teachers’ movement that situates it squarely within the “Movements of the Squares” protest wave is that it emerges out of the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism. As elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3, the current historical trajectory has its beginning with the economic crisis of stagflation the 1970’s and the subsequent shift to disciplinary policy prescriptions as a mechanism of jumpstarting the economy on the backs of working people (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2005). The result has been a prolonged period of stagnant real wages for the majority of the population at the same time that living costs such as housing, education, and health have risen precipitously. The U.S., together with most other leading economies, went from 30 years of rising living standards after World War II to forty years of stagnation and heightened precariousness since then (McNally, 2011; Picketty, 2014).

It is in this context of elite retrenchment that the “Movement of the Squares” has emerged as populist backlash. Moreover, the features of these movements not only share their historical positioning but also specific practices and logics, what Tarrow (2011) refers to as a “repertoire of contention.” Not only is the movement born in the same moment of hegemonic rupture, but it has engaged a similar set of practices on social media. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) advance the notion of “connective action” to describe the governing logics of this cycle of contention, animated by “personal action frames,” such as “we are the 99%,” which can be transposed to any individual as a mechanism to share individual experiences related to the broader movement.

While the hashtag use was fairly limited with the teachers’ movement, given that its origins were on Facebook, rather than Twitter or Instagram, the underlying use of narrative proved vital to bringing the movement together and to spreading its message.
Facebook’s networking affordances, driven by algorithms that tend to privilege posts eliciting emotional responses, are especially effective in spreading shared narratives.

However, this movement had more than just the resonance of narrative to attract followers: it also had sufficient organizational support - through its associated unions - to help sustain itself and realize concrete gains. In Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) formulation, the teachers benefitted from both the endurance of “organizationally enabled mobilizations” as well as the adaptability of “crowd-enabled mobilizations.” While the unions allowed teachers to gain the level of legitimacy they needed to succeed with their demands, the social media mobilization allowed the teachers to rally support for demands that went further than anything on the current union agenda. In short, the “crowd” was able to check one of the core weaknesses of organizationally driven movements: that they get compromised by their incorporation into existing power structures, and, in the case of American unions, see their fortunes too tightly tied to the fortunes of the Democratic Party (which creates a serious weakness in the so-called “Red States” where the 2018 mobilizations occurred).

By highlighting social media use, this study focuses on the “crowd-enabled” side to the teachers’ movement. In so doing, it aims to highlight the mechanisms used by activists in bringing about emotional resonance through the use of narrative to gain followers, while also showing how these followers were latterly motivated and mobilized to take to public squares to push their unions to fight for more ambitious demands than they were otherwise inclined to fight for.
Identifying Purpose in Social Media Practice

I focused this investigation on three of the four most prominent statewide movements of 2018: those in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona. The fourth state, Kentucky, was ultimately left out of the study due to the fact that Facebook usage there was scattered across dozens of county-level Facebook pages, whereas the other states all had active state-level pages for much of the duration of the movement activity.

For each of the three states, I surveyed posts among the groups dedicated to organizing, rather than the ones set up for other explicit purposes, such as discussion (though discussion-oriented posts were seen rather commonly in states that did not designate a group specifically for that purpose). In each case, I selected posts between the creation of the group online and the end of high-traffic activity on the group page, or the end of June 2018, whichever came sooner. I deemed a post “high-traffic” if it received at least twenty forms of engagement of any sort, i.e. likes, shares or comments. In the case of the WV United Caucus, the resulting date range was February 26, 2018 to May 16, 2018. Before then, there were other Facebook groups involved in organizing, but that was the first date wherein the movement was consolidated into one group. For the Oklahoma Teachers United, the selected date range was February 10, 2018 to May 10, 2018. Lastly, I used March 7th, 2018 until June 30th, 2018 for Arizona Educators United. High traffic activity continued after that end date due to the fact that teachers pivoted from their walkout campaign to an “Invest in Ed” ballot initiative that would have required high income earners to pay higher income taxes to cover proposed increases in education spending (the initiative was removed from the ballot in 2018 by the state’s Supreme Court, though a variation on it will be back in 2020).
I culled qualifying posts from the selected date ranges by taking a screenshot, and then proceeded to survey and categorize the resulting images. I inductively established categories during the survey process in a three-part process. Firstly, I provided broad descriptors of what each individual post was doing, and, as I noted certain tendencies, I combined individual posts into groups based on common themes, such as “expressions of solidarity from outside the movement,” a category that involved both images and messages of support from any non-teacher, including other union workers, celebrities or political figures. I then combined these thematic categories into larger groupings based on the purpose of posts, ultimately coming up with four categories of purpose: “narration of cause,” “mobilization,” “motivation,” and “discussion/ information sharing.”

The “narration of cause” posts were those that I felt most closely created the emotional resonance that Gerbaudo (2012) discusses. These posts articulated (or re-articulated) the central cause(s) of the movement by discussing some of the underlying issues in emotive and/or personal ways. They included posts that: shared and reacted to news updating on the struggle; communicated a personal background story and why it highlights the need for the movement; and sounded off on a particular issue.

The next category of purpose – “mobilization” – was the most straightforward to identify. These posts involved sharing details about a specific event or course of action: an invitation to join a Facebook event page or a plea to take action in some other way, such as by signing an online petition for a cause related to the movement.

I decided to call the third category “motivation,” as it involves posts rallying followers to sustain and grow the movement. In the end, this category was the most numerically prominent of the four, suggesting that this function may have been most
useful for activists organizing on Facebook. However, I would refrain from making too far-reaching a conclusion based on this fact, as the preponderance of “motivation” posts might be mostly attributable to the timing of when the state-wide Facebook groups that I surveyed were created: i.e., after the initial phase of recruitment and mobilization had passed on local and county level groups. These posts include messages of solidarity and support from other teachers involved in the movement, both within the state and in other states active in the movement, as well as from people outside of the movement. The content included pictures and videos of teachers from various rallies or walkouts within the given state; pictures of signs from the rallies; and text statements communicating support.

The final category I identified was “discussion/information sharing,” which encompasses posts with a neutral, information-sharing tone. These posts were not designed to convince followers to think a certain way about the issue, per se, as much as they were intended to simply provide details about a certain issue, or to seek responses on a query of some sort (polls were included in this category).

I then tabulated results from each of the categories in each state and provided a qualitative analysis of the data. The tabulation gives an idea of the prevalence of each category of purpose among posts in each state, while highlighting some of the differences in how activists used Facebook across those states. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis allows for these data to come to life: that is, for each of the fundamental purposes of these posts to be highlighted with specific examples that serve to tell the story of the movement through the ways in which Facebook was used by its participants.
A Heuristic of Social Media Purpose

While the existing literature on social media use by social movements emphasizes the affective register of social media use by movements, I argue that emotional appeals were mostly useful in the initial recruitment of teachers to the movement and occasionally in subsequent posts geared toward motivating the masses. The other two sides of the movement cycle (illustrated in the figure below), involved posts that tended to be dispassionate and informative in tone.

It is important to note that this typology is simply a heuristic to help in understanding a highly complex communicative environment: posts did not strictly follow this sequence, though there was a tendency in this direction. Moreover, I believe
the order makes sense as something of an organic progression for the life cycle of a movement: Firstly, recruit adherents to the movement through an emotive narration of the underlying cause; secondly, mobilize followers to become active participants; thirdly, motivate them to stay involved as protests continue and pressure mounts on the union infrastructure and the governing officials they are in negotiation with; lastly, engage in discussion about where the movement stands before potentially restarting the cycle of contestation.

That said, posts of all types could be found at any point in the timeline of the movement. “Discussion/ information” posts, in particular, tended to occur throughout the life cycle, owing to the fact that this category included miscellaneous posts, rather than just the reflective posts highlighted in the schematic above. Some miscellaneous examples include a protestor looking for an item lost at a rally; messages from journalists seeking interview subjects from the movement; and questions posed by individual members to the group about specific protest tactics or messages to put on signs. Nonetheless, my contention is that discussion posts took on added prominence at the end of the protest cycle, wherein there was a need for reflection and analysis before pushing forward with the next round of actions.
The variation in the types of post employed in each state is less a function of any fundamental differences in the usage of the platform in the state as a whole, and more a result of the fact that the principal statewide Facebook group that I inspected came into existence at different stages in the progression of the movement in those states. For example, the lack of “narration of cause” posts in Arizona is a result of the fact that most of the original recruitment of followers occurred in the individual district pages, prior to the implementation of the statewide group page. Meanwhile, in West Virginia, there was a dearth of mobilization posts, owing to the fact that the statewide group was made public after the first wave of mobilizations had already occurred, and, thus, the focus shifted largely to motivation of participants in the date range that I captured in this study. As such, Oklahoma produced the most representative sample across all categories of purpose, due to the fact that I was able to grab a set of dates that covered the entire cycle of contestation, and none of the categories of purpose occurred on other group pages.

Together, the sampling of posts used in this study effectively tell a compelling story about the role of social media in this uprising, which I will now flesh out in a category-by-category analysis.
Narration of Cause

The Oklahoma Teachers United set produces the most representative posts for this category, owing to the fact that the main Oklahoma group page, “Oklahoma Teachers Unites,” was implemented in time to capture initial articulations of the movement’s cause. The following post is an exemplar of this initial phase of narrating the cause.

By comparison, the following screenshot exemplifies a re-articulation of the cause, posted just a few weeks after the post above, as teachers continued to mobilize despite receiving a pay raise.
This second example illustrates the emotive nature of this category of Facebook post, as the group admin expresses frustration with the ongoing impasse, in which some gains were won, but there continues to be a perceived lack of appreciation of the severity of teachers’ plight on the part of the news media. Likewise, the following post from West
Virginia heightened the level of emotional resonance by relating the underlying issues to the user’s personal story.

This example also illustrates the fact that it was not just teachers involved in the movement, as organizers also included other school workers and public employees in their advocacy, recognizing that they have fallen victim to the same neoliberal forces that teachers have been subjected to.

As a whole, this “category of purpose” tended to be more personal and emotive than the other categories. It is here that other scholars investigating social media use by social movements are correct in saying that emotional resonance is important in constituting the movement. However, I contend that once activists were recruited, the tone of Facebook posts began to shift.
Mobilization

Once activists had been recruited into the movement via appeals narrating the cause, the next logical step was to mobilize them into action. It is here that the movement began to pivot from social media into the squares: what Gerbaudo (2012) describes as the “material precipitation from symbolic assemblages to bodily assemblages in public space” (p.42). This shift necessarily centered on translating the emotional energy into a congregation in the real world. In that sense, these posts were more logistical in nature: an invitation to join a rally or other event, or to sign a petition or donate to the cause. Here are examples of each of these forms of mobilization:
Oklahoma Teachers United

March 5, 2018

THE TIME IS NOW

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Mary Jo Strickling Kovalcik West Virginia supports you.
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Author Oklahoma Teachers United Thank you, Mary Jo Strickling Kovalcik!
Like Reply 1y

Sophia Fultz Using the logo for the group supporting the OEA with 60k members is extremely misleading.
Like Reply 1y

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Doug Kilgore
April 27, 2018

#RedForED Today
9 am Rally at Capitol
Shuttles from Chase Field
Afternoon Homework

213 45 Comments
These examples all represent fairly straightforward efforts at mobilizing followers to specific purposes within the movement. However, the occasional message blurs the line between categories, insofar as it rearticulates the cause while also mobilizing for a specific purpose. In those cases, I had to make a judgment call based on that I determined the principal purpose of the post was. The missive below from Oklahoma Teachers United is one such example, as the organizer reiterates some of the core tenets of the movements’ message before continuing on with detailed steps on how to respond to a specific set of circumstances.

While this last example operates at an emotional register, thus incorporating elements of “narration of cause” posts, it also contains explicit steps to be taken by
followers, thus rendering it a part of the “mobilization” category of purpose. As a whole, this category tends toward the more dispassionate side, as the objective is relaying concrete steps followers could take.

Nonetheless, there was still room for emotional appeals as the movement pressed on and organizers sought to keep its adherents involved, as will be glimpsed in the next category.

**Motivation**

What separates “motivation” from “mobilization” in this typology is that the former starts to occur after some amount of mobilization has already taken place. At this point, the movement was underway, pressure was building on its political targets, and lead organizers sought to sustain the pressure by boosting the energy level of the movement’s participants. The mechanisms of motivation took the form of expressions of solidarity and support from: teachers within the state, teachers in other states where the movement took hold, and people from outside the movement. In the former case, messages frequently contained images and videos from rallies or pickets that had already occurred, often with teachers holding signs. The message might also contain text rallying supporters to participate in an upcoming event, or relating a personal story designed to rally, rather than to re-articulate the cause (in which case the post would have been categorized as belonging to the “narration of cause” purpose). In the second case, a common message of motivation involved expressions of solidarity from or, on behalf of, the other states involved in the broader movement. These frequently involved images from protesters in those states, but also might take the form of a gesture making a nod to
what is going on in the other states (such as a sign at a protest). In the case of outside support, messages of solidarity in all formats (text, image and video) come from other workers, parents, community members or celebrities.

Messages of motivation from within each state’s movement were plentiful, usually involving colorful imagery from ongoing rally efforts, accentuating the sense of “collective effervescence” experienced in the squares. The following is an example of a video from Arizona wherein a sea of red-clad teachers take part in a rally at the Capitol Building in Phoenix:
Prior to that action, followers were encouraged to attend with the following motivating text message from one of the lead organizers, which is an example of another type of message of motivation from fellow in-state teacher activists:

**Kelley Wendland Fisher**  
**Admin · April 27, 2018 · Peoria, AZ**

*Hey everyone! Do you think we can break Thursday's record crowd at the capitol of 75,000? Let's shoot for a hundred thousand! What do you think?*

*Elizabeth Lalasz and 1.4K others · 315 Comments*

Another variant of in-state “motivation” posts took the form of personal stories designed to rally the troops to action. The following is an example from West Virginia where a teacher undergoing treatment for cancer shares her message of solidarity. She also re-articulates the cause in her message – “We are real teachers who love our students and need affordable healthcare” – but this is a secondary purpose of the post, designed to augment the primary purpose of inspiring and motivating.
The second type of “motivation” post involved messages of solidarity between the various states involved in the uprising. In some cases, these posts reference all four of the major states involved in the 2018 uprising, sometimes with the hashtag #onepurpose, for those that were cross posted on other platforms. Others gave a nod to just one of the other states involved, with West Virginia being the most common of these, given its status as the pioneer of the movement:
The final type of Message of Motivation was far less common than the previous two, though they tended to get a lot of engagement, owing to the fact that they involve high-profile individuals, often celebrities from the entertainment world, expressing their solidarity with teachers.
Thank you Carrie Underwood for caring about our schools!!

So proud of my sisters...Making a difference for the best reason...KIDS! Here's hoping OK schools get the funding they need so students and teachers can

Thank you, Reese Witherspoon!

These striking teachers in W. VA made sure their students still got fed. That is called Character. Thank you for sharing @nokidhungry
These posts appeal to emotions in order to rally the ranks to further action by illustrating the broad-based support behind previous actions. In this respect, they demonstrate that the initial purpose has been achieved: that the articulation of the cause has resonated widely, resulting in a bona fide social movement.

However, the work was not complete at that stage, as pressure needed to be sustained so that the union infrastructure could succeed with its work. It is here that Facebook affords users the capacity to do that which was far more difficult in a prior era: easily communicate with one another in order to assess the progress that has been made so far.

**Discussion/ Information**

Despite the literature on social media-born social movements emphasizing emotion-generating images as the principal mechanism employed (Gerbaudo 2012, 2017; Tufecki, 2017), the reality is that Facebook affords plenty of space for discussion and inquiry, owing to the fact that the platform makes it easy to pose questions and for members to then respond and continue the conversation in the comment section. The following example from the Arizona group vividly illustrates this functionality:
Within this category, posts would also occasionally focus on informing, rather than inquiring, though this certainly would not preclude the possibility of discussion in the comment section, which is always present. In this case, the Oklahoma Teachers United apprise its followers of the state of how successful its associated union was in achieving its stated demands:
Both of these posts make it clear that discussion posts are valuable as mechanisms to continue the discourse undergirding the movement into the next cycle, plainly vivified by Noah Karvelis above: “Let’s keep discussing, learning, and moving forward in the fight.”

These discussion posts may very well have been more important with the teachers’ movement than the previous “Movements of the Squares,” owing to the existence of an organization engaged in an actual legislative fight, so that there was more to assess and discuss in terms of concrete results. Indeed, discussion was the principal
function through which the tension between the unions and the movement was addressed on social media. While the tension was expressed prominently in the “articulation of the cause” posts, and often served as the fuel driving “motivation” posts, it was through discussion that teachers could take stock of how far they succeeded in pushing their union infrastructure to change prevailing working conditions, while contemplating potential future courses of action. The movement would likely not have endured long enough to realize serious gains if not for Facebook’s conversational affordances operating outside of an emotional register. These posts, like the union structure that teachers had, served to help anchor the movement, and prevent the sort of ephemerality that plagued other sectors of the “Movements of the Squares.”

A Hybrid Movement in a Hybrid Moment

In this cycle of communicative purpose, an articulation of a cause was voiced, which then become the rallying cry of a social movement firmly situated within a larger historical wave of contention aimed at addressing the historic levels of inequality and precariousness of the neoliberal epoch. The teachers’ movement effectively aired grievances related to pay, pensions, health care, education spending and a host of other issues, pushing further than their union leadership had in recent years. While not all demands were met, the movement was certainly more successful than earlier manifestations of the “Movements of the Squares.” While those movements suffered from an ephemerality of a “crowd-enabled mobilization” lacking organizational structure, the teachers benefitted from having both “crowd-enabled” as well as “organizationally-enabled” features, to borrow from Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) typology.
In this sense, the teachers’ movement can be seen as something of a “hybrid movement,” analogous to Chadwick’s (2013) concept of a “hybrid media system,” defined as being “built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics” (p.4). By extension, one can conceive of a “hybrid movement” as one that embraces logics from older movements as well as those of the digital era. Rather than confining a movement to the narrow domain of one form of media and its associated “repertoire of contention,” the movement engages various tactics from different “repertoires of contention” and makes use of their associated organizational capacities and media practices. Such an approach largely dodges the various problems associated with the fetishization of one form of media and its undergirding logics, as described by Wolfson (2014) with regards to Indymedia, but which could be extended to Occupy and the other “Movements of the Squares.”

While I have situated the teachers’ movement within that larger cycle of contention running through Tahrir Square and Zucotti Park for reasons of historical analysis, the teachers benefited from using both old and new tactics, which is precisely what rendered their movement so dynamic. The “old” organizational form, i.e. the union structure, on its own stopped functioning properly, as union leadership had not been adequately resisting the neoliberal assault on their profession over the past few decades, especially in the so-called “red states” discussed here. “New” organizational forms on their own would also have proven inadequate, without the pre-existing unions to serve as organizational anchors and legitimizing agents for the movement. However, in union, the two worked in a tense symbiosis that realized a measured, though significant, level of
success. The “new” tactics permitted a healthy tension to manifest between the rank-and-file and union leadership, resulting in far more ambitious gains than the latter could have ever achieved without this movement.

The affordances of Facebook created a fresh communicative opening, permitting teachers to address issues far more expansive than those traditionally addressed in the formal collective bargaining process. While formal union channels – especially in recent years – severely limited the scope of issues that could be raised; in Facebook, teacher activists found tools with which they were able to connect around a broader range of grievances. Facebook’s technological affordances permitted activists to articulate their cause, mobilize other disaffected teachers to action, motivate them to continue to keep up the pressure, and discuss the state of their movement. By engaging these tools, fueled by the resentment of neglect over the decades of neoliberal austerity, they succeeded in building one of the largest and most consequential strike waves in modern American history.
Chapter 7: Teachers in the Dominant News Discourses

A Neoliberal Paradigm Devoid of Issues

This chapter engages a frame analysis of dominant print news media coverage of both the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike and the 2018 rolling walkouts. In so doing it builds upon previous work inspecting popular culture depictions of schools and teachers related in Chapter 3, wherein I discussed dominant tropes present in the depiction of teachers that frame education as a dysfunctional arena with inept teachers and administrators desperately in need of outside saviors to swoop in (Ayers, 201; Kantor et al, 2001). In that chapter, I also argued that these tropes have paralleled the promulgation of the neoliberal reform which has essentially brought this narrative to life by disproportionately faulting teachers for social and economic problems largely outside of their control.

This chapter inspects a sampling of print news coverage from major national publications around both the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and the broader nation-wide walkout of 2018, looking for dominant themes, discursive currents and tone that together serve to frame the larger narrative around the movement. Some of the guiding questions as I began this analysis included: To what extend does the coverage cast a disciplinary tone in its treatment of teachers? Are teachers disproportionately blamed for economic problems and other social issues in print coverage? What ideological tendencies are glimpsed in the coverage, and how do they reflect the breadth of elite reaction to the movement?

In fleshing out the dominant frames present in the coverage, I advance four core arguments. Firstly, the dominant news media frames generally reflect the overarching
pro-corporate zeitgeist of the era, consistent with Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model that sees dominant news media as tending to overstate the elite ideology while obscuring or underreporting alternative viewpoints. Secondly, and relatedly, much of the coverage is devoid of any serious discussion of the issues that were motivating teachers, and when issues were raised, that discussion tended to trivialize matters, by, for example, focusing narrowly on teacher pay and not the myriad other issues that teachers were raising as part of these actions. This is consistent with how dominant news coverage of strikes have been historically in this country, as remarked by Walter Lippman (1922): “If you study the way many a strike is reported in the press, you will find, very often, that the issues are rarely in the headlines, barely in the leading paragraphs, and sometimes not even mentioned anywhere” (). Thirdly, there was a perceptible shift to more favorable coverage between 2012 and 2018, which I attribute to the institutional weight given to the nation-wide movement, as compared to the 2012 strike which was localized in one city, and which news media could dismiss as an isolated incident. Fourthly, I, nonetheless, contend the more favorable coverage did not fundamentally challenge the dominant neoliberal paradigm in which educational discourses have been situated over the last 40-50 years. Instead, this coverage largely served to set the left bounds of the permissible neoliberal discourse, as it was still fixed in an evaluative and monitorial register concerned as it was with the question of whether or not teachers are to blame for problems in the educational domain.
Identifying Frames in the Dominant News Coverage

In extracting sources for this investigation, I queried news articles related to the teachers’ uprising in Chicago in 2012 and the multi-state uprising in 2018. For the former, I searched for articles dated between September 1, 2012 and December 31, 2012 containing the words “Chicago teachers” in the four largest national newspapers by circulation: The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today and The Wall Street Journal. I included both news articles and op-ed's in my study but excluded blogs from the web-only editions of the papers. For the 2018 multi-state teacher uprising, I selected articles in the same publications dating from January 1, 2018-May 31st, 2018, based on a search query for at least two of the following words “teachers, movement, strike, and protest.” Once again, I included both news articles and op-ed's but excluded blogs in the web-only editions of the papers. In both cases, I arrived at the date range based on the frequency of relevant articles. While local coverage leading up to the 2012 CTU strike was abundant through the summer of that year, national publications did not take notice until September. Meanwhile, analyses about its impact began to taper off toward the end of December. Likewise, murmurs of teacher discontent in 2018 began in early January and slowly tapered off by May of that year.

I began with an initial screening of articles clipped using an online search engine through the databases of the publications culled in the above process. First, I sorted articles by whether the treatment of teachers was negative, positive or neutral. I then went back through each pile and asked myself what it was about each article that led me to render that initial judgment: what words, terminology, or overall tone led me to categorize each in those ways. I then inductively devised a coding scheme based upon
these tendencies and used them to describe four dominant frames described below. In employing Tuchman’s (1978) notion of a frame that organizes an attitude into “everyday reality,” I sought to illustrate how certain viewpoints about education, teachers, and their movements were naturalized in the coverage.

The frames were determined by the preponderance of associated code words throughout the article. In cases where multiple frames were identified with an article, I gave preference to the frame established closest to the lead paragraph, i.e. the one that established the overarching attitude of the article. In this manner, I adhered to Chong and Druckman’s (2007) conception of a frame being determined by both the values articulated in an article as well as the salience given to them. Specifically, they hold that frames are activated through attitude structures, which, among other things, are built upon considerations such as availability and accessibility (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In other words, for a frame to be salient, it must be something that the public has been repeatedly exposed to. In relation to the critical theory used as the framework of this study, I am arguing that these frames emerge out of common themes and tropes circulated by elite sectors of society, i.e. Hall’s (2013) “primary definers.” Journalists and their readership will almost unconsciously attach themselves to these attitudes, and their undergirding logics, because they have been so successfully disseminated for so long as part of the forty year-long neoliberal project.

I ultimately found four dominant frames: two from the list of articles I deemed “negative,” and one each from the “positive” and “neutral” piles. Among negative articles, I identified two frames, which I called the “Strict Father Frame” and the “Teacher vs. the People Frame.” Meanwhile, neutral articles tended to fall into what I
called the “War Frame.” Lastly, the positive articles almost exclusively adhered to the “Savage Inequalities Frame.” A more detailed description of each of these frames follows.

The first negative frame I identified portrays teachers variously as selfish, childish, and undisciplined. I label this one the “Strict Father Frame,” following Lakoff’s (2004) conception of the conservative ethos that extols discipline as the highest virtue in the formation of children. Regarding how this ethos informs certain aspects of neoliberal education policy, such as the advocacy of school vouchers, he says:

Because immoral, undisciplined children can lead moral, disciplined children astray, parents should be able to choose to which school they send their children. Government funding should be taken from public schools and given to parents in the form of vouchers. This will help wealthier (more disciplined and moral) citizens send their children to private or religious schools that teach conservative values and impose appropriate discipline. (pp.83-84)

The same logic largely animates the charter school movement, in addition to the related pedagogy of test-taking that undergirds neoliberal reforms. This rationale sees underperforming, undisciplined teachers as responsible for the perceived crisis of education, and the associated frame tends to exaggerate the effect that these teachers have on the overall state of education in this country. Poor performance by pupils is attributed to poor teachers, rather than any other factor that might have an impact on student performance.

I also categorized articles that placed disproportionate emphasis on economic realities within the domain of the “Strict Father” frame, owing to the fact that the overarching tenor remains one of discipline. As Apple (1986, 1995) argues, one of the fundamental disciplinary mechanisms of the neoliberal economy is its tendency to
displace economic problems to other realms, most notably the educational system, which has the effect of blaming teachers for conditions largely out of their control. In my view, the other side of the coin of this tendency is singling education out for cuts when there is an economic downturn and concomitant drying of public coffers, rather than any of a number of other programs (or by asking the wealthy to pay more in taxes in order to cover budgetary shortfalls).

The second negative frame pits teachers against the society that they are inconveniencing because of the strike: be it students missing class or parents scrambling to find babysitters. I call it the “Teachers vs the People” frame, as it makes teachers out to be selfishly pursuing their own interests at the expense of the body politic.

The third frame tends to read in a typically neutral, dispassionate journalistic tone. Nonetheless, I argue that it trivializes the teachers’ movements by placing the emphasis on political dynamics. This “War Frame” pits teachers against the major political leaders in the jurisdictions that the movements are operating in, such as the CTU vs Rahm Emanuel in 2012, which was the most pronounced political war frame in the coverage inspected in this investigation, owing in large part to the combative personalities of both Emanuel and then-CTU president Karen Lewis.

While this coverage occasionally sympathizes with teachers, I contend that it, nonetheless, tends to undermine their cause by taking the focus away from the issues being raised. Rather than framing the teachers as fighting for the interest of students and for the improvement of educational standards that would benefit the whole of society, this frame generally paints teachers as self-interested actors doing battle with other self-interested actors.
The fourth frame is the most sympathetic one toward the teachers’ movements, insofar as it provides socioeconomic context. I call it the “Savage Inequalities Frame,” in a nod to Kozol’s (1991) work charting the inequities across school districts, particularly between predominantly white suburban districts and predominantly minority urban districts. This frame acknowledges that there are, indeed, social forces beyond teachers’ control impacting student performance. Among the major national dailies, the Washington Post engaged this frame most often for the 2012 strike, owing in large part to having a dedicated education reporter, Valerie Strauss, who frequently wrote critically of the high stakes testing regimen effected by the neoliberal reforms.

Nonetheless, my contention is that this frame, while more sympathetic toward teachers, does not effectively challenge the logics that have animated the neoliberal reform movement. Instead, it tends to incorporate the narrative about education being in crisis that has historically been used to justify neoliberal reforms, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 (Goldstein, 2014; Reichel, 2018). The underlying logic here is that the duty of schools is to create productive workers for a dynamic economy. Individual economic success is seen as being a function of personal scholastic achievement, and, likewise, the obverse condition is held to be true: that is, economic problems across society are a sign that educational systems – and the professionals working therein are failing (Goldstein, 2014).

In short, I hold that the “savage inequalities” frame, rather than breaking with the hegemonic view of education, instead sets its left boundary. While it recognizes that education systems operate inside of larger social systems, and that teachers cannot be held solely accountable for the struggles of their students, it continues to operate within
the “education in crisis” paradigm and internalizes its instrumentalist logic, insofar as it does not generally question the notion that schools should be serving the market first and foremost. In this respect, it is illustrative of the deep contradictions of the liberal standpoint, which holds that, on the one hand, education suffers from injustices created by unrestrained market logics and, on the other hand, it must be fixed in order that it better serve the market.

**A Shift to the Left Bounds of the Neoliberal Paradigm**

The results of the frame analysis are tallied in figures 1 and 2 below for the 2012 CTU strike and 2018 strike wave, respectively. The two charts list the number of articles employing each of the frames delineated above, laid out from left to right as a reflection of the general political attitude of each frame: from the left bounds of the “Savage Inequalities” frame to the most overtly hostile frames: the “Teachers vs. the People” frame and the “Strict Father” frame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 CTU Wave</th>
<th>Strict Father</th>
<th>Teachers vs The People</th>
<th>War Frame</th>
<th>Savage Inequalities</th>
<th>None of the above</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>WaPo</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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The “War Frame” was the most immediately identifiable frame with its associated code words evoking fighting words of various sorts: battle, brawl, clash, conflict, showdown, confrontation and the like. Here is a representative snippet from the September 27, 2012 Washington Post:

The strike attracted national attention because the battle was over education reforms that mirrored conflicts taking place around the country and also because Emanuel, a prominent Democrat and President Obama’s former chief of staff, was brawling with organized labor, a key constituency that Democrats need in the coming presidential election. (Layton, 2012)

At times, the word “war” itself was actually employed in order to delineate larger political implications of the strike, as in this paragraph (one down from the lead) in the September 12, 2012 edition of the New York Times:

The strike pits several core components of the Democratic coalition against one another: The teachers’ union and much of organized labor are on a war footing against Rahm Emanuel, Chicago’s Democratic mayor and Mr. Obama’s chief of staff. What is more, the strike pits organized labor against myriad wealthy liberals

<table>
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<tr>
<th>2018 Strike Wave</th>
<th>Strict Father</th>
<th>Teachers vs the People</th>
<th>War Frame</th>
<th>Savage Inequalities</th>
<th>None of the Above</th>
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<td>WaPo</td>
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<td>WSJ</td>
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vital donors to Democratic coffers - many of whom contribute heavily to efforts to finance charter schools and weaken teachers’ unions. (Greenhouse, 2012)

This analysis of the political fault lines is arguably appropriate in coverage of the strike, though positioning the analysis toward the top of the article serves to minimize the issues animating the union movement, making it seem as if the teachers’ “war footing” is mostly political theater. This playing to the news value of “conflict” also leads to a tendency to overdramatize the narrative. Take this lead from the September 19, 2012 edition of the New York Times exemplifies:

The Chicago Teachers Union agreed on Tuesday to end its strike in the nation’s third-largest school system, allowing 350,000 children to return to classes on Wednesday and bringing to a close, at least for now, a tense standoff over issues like teacher evaluation and job security that upended this city for more than a week. (Davey & Yaccino, 2012)

The notion that the nation’s third-largest city was “upended” by the strike is probably a hyperbolic treatment of the political drama. This coverage also veers into the “Teacher vs. the People” frame, as it leaves the impression of the union gratuitously creating turmoil.

Treating the teachers as unprovoked disruptors was, indeed, the defining tendency of the “Teachers vs the People” frame. These usually came in the form of op-eds, such as this lead paragraph from Joe Nocera (2012), a business journalist opining on education matters: “No matter how quickly the Chicago teachers’ strike ends, whether it is this afternoon or two months from now, it’s not going to end well for the city’s public school students.” Joseph Epstein (2012), writing for the Wall Street Journal, concurs: “Whichever way the Chicago teachers strike ends, one may be fairly certain that the
children of Chicago will not win.” The code words include descriptions of students losing, being hurt, or being unfairly inconvenienced or disadvantaged by the strike.

Alternatively, the papers provide an anecdote highlighting the purported injury done to students, such as a Washington Post article quoting a mother who said she had to send her son 15 miles away each weekday to a cousin’s house “so he wouldn’t be left unsupervised in a neighborhood known for violent crime and gangs.” While there was undoubtedly some hardship on the part of parents having to arrange care for their children, it is misleading to provide anecdotes like this one without also noting that the vast majority of parents supported the strike (Uetricht, 2014), and that the CTU made much effort to organize community members in the lead-up to the work stoppage, viewing their efforts, as they did, as part of a broader social movement (Ashby & Bruno, 2016; Brogan, 2014). In a similarly framed article in the September 17, 2012 Wall Street Journal, the authors found a rally with “more than 20 parents gathered . . . to protest the teachers strike. Some carried signs that said: ‘350,000 CPS hostages! Let our children learn’” (Porter & Nicas, 2012). A group of twenty people on a street corner was deemed newsworthy enough to run with this hostile frame. Nonetheless, that was more than they needed to claim frustration on the part of parents in other articles, such as the May 1, 2018 piece updating on the strike in Arizona, which led with, “Arizona parents kept scrambling to find alternative arrangements for their children as the state faced a fourth day of teacher walkouts Tuesday” (Hobbs & Hackman, 2018, p. A3). No evidence outside of a single anecdote is provided to corroborate this lead, the spirit of which is ultimately contradicted through a corrective final paragraph, declaring: “Many parents
have spoken out in support of teachers, though some acknowledge the inconvenience of needing alternative child-care plans” (Hobbs & Hackman, 2018, p. A3).

This frame often overlapped with the “strict father” frame insofar as it involved chastising teachers for behavior deemed out of acceptable bounds. The Wall Street Journal spent the greatest percentage of its coverage of the teachers’ movement operating in this frame, usually by taking a disciplinary tone discussing the perceived waste in education spending. The lead from this op-ed in the September 21, 2012 Wall Street Journal exemplifies this tendency:

Now that Chicago’s children have returned to not learning in school, we can all move on to the next crisis in Illinois public finance: unfunded public pensions. Readers who live in the other 49 states will be pleased to learn that Governor Pat Quinn’s 2012 budget proposal already floated the idea of a federal guarantee of its pension debt. Think Germany and Eurobonds for Greece, Italy and Spain.

Thank you for sharing, Governor.

Sooner or later, we knew it would come to this since the Democrats who are running Illinois into the ground can’t bring themselves to oppose union demands. Illinois now has some $8 billion in current debts outstanding and taxpayers are on the hook for more than $200 billion in unfunded retirement costs for government workers. By some estimates, the system could be the first in the nation to go broke, as early as 2018. (An Illinois Pension Bailout?, 2012)

This frame is more determined by tone than in specific code words: a disciplinary tone scolding teachers for being out of line and public officials for not taking them to task. Together, they are to blame for budget shortfalls, and surely not the reckless, imprudent investors that threw the country into financial crisis in 2007-2008, thus precipitating the ongoing public budget problems. In other words, the “Strict Father” frame is generally short on context and history, though it is occasionally long on smugness, as evinced by Amanda Ripley’s op-ed in the September 15, 2012 Wall Street Journal, where she declares, “Many countries have revolutionized their education systems
in recent years, but not one of them has done it through strikes, walkouts or righteous indignation” (Ripley, 2012).

The frame that is most sympathetic to the teachers’ cause, wherein student performance is treated as being a function of broader socioeconomic issues, is the “Savage Inequalities” frame. Among the major national daily papers, the Washington Post most often employed it, owing largely to the presence of dedicated educational reporter Valerie Strauss, as well as liberal columnist Eugene Robinson. The latter wrote one of the best examples of an op-ed from this perspective in the September 18, 2012 edition:

> It is reasonable to hold teachers accountable for their performance. But it is not reasonable – or, in the end, productive – to hold them accountable for factors that lie far beyond their control. It is fair to insist that teachers approach their jobs with the assumption that every child, rich or poor, can succeed. It is not fair to expect teachers to correct all the imbalances and remedy all the pathologies that result from growing inequality in society.

You didn’t see any of this reality in “Waiting for Superman,” the 2010 documentary that argued we should “solve” the education crisis by establishing more charter schools and, of course, stomping the teachers’ unions. You won’t see it later this month in “Won’t Back Down,” starring Viola Davis and Maggie Gyllenhaal, which argues for “parent trigger” laws designed to produce yet more charter schools and yet more teacher-bashing. (Robinson, 2012)

This piece embodies the “Savage Inequalities” frame insofar as it criticizes the “teacher bashing” present in more conservative framings of the teachers’ movement, while, nonetheless, operating within the discursive bounds of the neoliberal paradigm by employing terminology about an “education crisis.” This “crisis” is not contextualized as part of a broader political project of eviscerating public institutions under the guise of austerity, nor is the “inequality” mentioned placed in the context of that intentional political project. The impression left by this treatment is that these are “social ills”:
problems of a sort that need to be addressed through policy prescriptions (just not those prescriptions advocated by reformers). A more radical rendering would be that inequality is a natural feature of the existing social order - one that would manifest in education just as readily as anywhere else – and that addressing inequalities both inside and outside of the education system requires a restructuring of that social order. I would argue that the CTU, by organizing outside of its membership ranks within the broader communities in which it operates (Brogan 2014, Uetricht, 2014), embraces a radical vision not captured by the left liberal bounds of the “Savage Inequalities” frame.

Another example of this approach was glimpsed in the pages of the Washington Post during the 2018 strike wave in an op-ed by Paul Waldman, writing:

There's a revolt beginning among the nation's schoolteachers, one that could well pick up momentum and spread around the country. Or it might be more properly understood as a revolt among teachers in states governed by Republicans . . . What we're seeing is an indictment of the Republican model of taxation, spending and governance. . . . Oklahoma's schools and educators have endured some of the steepest cuts in education in the last decade, reductions that are evident in dwindling supplies, aging textbooks and the pay stubs of teachers. Before last week, state lawmakers have not raised the minimum salary for teachers in a decade, making them among the worst paid in the nation. (Waldman, 2018)

Once again, the left boundary of the neoliberal paradigm criticizes its right flank, with the author attributing problems in education to Republican governance, papering over the fact that the strike wave began in a solidly Democratic city and state in Chicago in 2012, and the reform movement that has roused teachers throughout the country has been promulgated by both parties. While Republicans have undoubtedly gone further in their gutting of the public sector, and probably merit more attention, the reality is that neoliberal logics have been hegemonic within both major political parties over much of the last forty years. Moreover, the more recent wave of teacher uprisings was not limited
to the “red states” that saw walkouts in the spring in 2018, but also includes subsequent actions taken in Democratic locales, such as Los Angeles, Denver and Oakland (not to mention Chicago yet again).

The forces teachers are facing in red states and blue cities have grown similar in recent years, due to the increasing nationalization of education policy. While traditionally the domain of states and local jurisdictions, education become more and more uniform throughout the country, owing to the sophistication and power of neoliberal reformers in organizing their efforts. A recent study by Reckhow et al (2019) found that this influence has been able to effectively undermine teachers’ union powers in the five cities they inspected: Bridgeport, Conn.; Denver; New Orleans; Indianapolis; and Los Angeles. In looking at the impact of 132 “large national donors” in school board elections in these cities, they found:

In four of the five cities we studied, the education reform organizations and independent expenditure committees outspent teacher unions. These trends have continued in Los Angeles through the most recent election cycle. In 2017, Los Angeles held a school board election that spent more campaign funds than ever had been spent in the United States. And two-thirds of that spending came from organizations supporting charter expansion.

The federal campaign contributions of these large national donors show that they are mostly Democrats. That fact reveals sharp divisions within the Democratic Party over education policy. (para.11)

The fight for teachers is being waged not only against their traditional opponents, the Republicans, but also against Democrats that have embraced neoliberal reforms. The fact that the “Savage Inequalities” frame generally does not acknowledge the bipartisan nature of this assault on teachers places severe limitations on its ability to capture the larger social forces at work behind the reform movement in American education.
Nonetheless, this framing is more sympathetic toward teachers in general, and it is significant that reportage shifted more in its direction during the 2018 uprising: reflective, I would argue, of the fact that teachers successfully pushed the discourse on education in a more critical direction.

This shift largely came at the expense of the “Teachers vs the People” frame, which virtually vanished from view. In fact, when certain politicians took to engaging this frame themselves, accusing teachers of compromising the interests of the general public, much of the reportage on their remarks was sympathetic to teachers. The most notable example came in response to former Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin’s admonishing of teachers for their walkout, when he accused them of endangering student welfare by declaring: “I guarantee you somewhere in Kentucky today a child was sexually assaulted that was left at home because there was nobody there to watch them.”

The most prominent newspaper in the state, the Louisville Courier-Journal, responded with an article by their dedicated education reporter, Mandy McLaren, highlighting the disgust felt by members of the public. Her article led with:

Republican Gov. Matt Bevin's "guarantee" that a teacher protest led to a child being sexually abused somewhere in Kentucky added to the outrage that many educators say they have been feeling for months.

"For the governor of the state of Kentucky to come out and basically say teachers are responsible for children being molested — are you serious?" said J.P. LaVertu, a Shelby County teacher. "He's a disgrace to our state."

Bevin's comments, which he made to reporters Friday evening, have been widely condemned by educators and scorned by members of both parties.

For the sake of newsworthiness, the article places an emphasis on conflict, and thus falls under a variant of the “War Frame,” though in a much more sympathetic light
for teachers, which was part of a broader trend with that frame in 2018. By rendering the “War Frame” one of a broad-based popular movement taking on individual politicians, the coverage tended to be much more favorable to teachers, compared to 2012, when the frame focused on the dueling personalities of former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and former CTU President Karen Lewis.

Meanwhile, there was far more coverage falling under the “savage inequalities” frame at the national level. In this case, the frame tended to focus on disparities between the states wherein actions took place and the national average. These reports provided data discussing how these states were all at or near the bottom nationally in per-pupil student funding and teacher pay. The New York Times especially shifted its focus from “war frame” coverage to “savage inequalities.” While it is likely that part of this shift is attributable to the lack of high-profile political actors to depict as being at war with each other, I hold that much of it has to do with a far more favorable environment for teachers to get their word across.

The difference in 2018 was that a broad-based national movement was underway, leading to more receptivity on the part of news media outlets to teachers’ demands. Rather than one union engaging in battle with a mayor viewed favorably by the political and media establishments, teachers were now taking action in cities and towns across several different states. The effect of this was to have news media view this as a bona fide social movement rather than an isolated union action: giving them what Benford and Snow (2000) describe as the power of “signifying” agents. The teachers had effectively entered into the “contested realm of media discourse in which struggles over meaning and interpretation are central” (Gamson & Wolfseld, 1993, p.119). Their collective action
frame now had influence over the dominant news frames employed by major national newspapers.

Moreover, the 2018 movement has more institutional weight to it. Amenta et al.’s (2012) work on news framing of social movements demonstrates the importance of institutional actors as providing legitimacy. While unions were involved in both rounds of teacher actions, the CTU strike of 2012 involved a newly elected leadership that was challenging established hegemonic thinking about the role of the union in the city, and thus probably did not carry the same institutional weight at the time. However, in 2018, when teachers throughout the country were taking action in unison throughout the country, the institutional factor held greater sway, despite those actions often being taken outside of formal union channels (the sheer breadth of the movement infused it with institutional legitimacy).

Nonetheless, I contend that even these more sympathetic, liberal portrayals fail to capture the underlying challenge to neoliberal pedagogy posed by these teachers. While the uprising of 2018 made it easy to portray the movement as one of teachers taking on their states’ Republican lawmakers, the larger story undermines that narrative when one considers the many “blue cities” that have seen teacher actions since then. Moreover, while the “Savage Inequalities” frame recognizes the prevalence of inequities in this country’s school systems, it rarely probes the underlying causes of their existence. The larger social forces, most notably the forty-year neoliberal project of elite retrenchment focused on eviscerating the public sector, are rarely mentioned in any coverage. The result is to leave the impression that inequality is some mysterious social ill: a disease of
the social fabric, rather than the natural result of an intentional social and political project.

In short, this relatively sympathetic frame tends to see problems of education as isolated from other societal problems. In contrast, the conservative rendering (the right bounds of the neoliberal discourse) views education as the *cause* rather than a *reflection* of a larger social malaise. Apple (1996) explains:

The political Right in the United States has been very successful in mobilizing support against the educational system and its employees, often exporting the crisis in the economy to the schools. Thus, one of its major achievements has been to shift the blame for unemployment and underemployment, for the loss of economic competitiveness, and for the supposed breakdown of “traditional” values and standards in the family, education, and paid and unpaid workplaces, from the economic, cultural, and social policies and effects of dominant groups to the school and other public agencies. (p.28)

The effect of this successful project has been to structure the discourse around education in such a way that educators are placed on the defensive. The dominant question animating this discourse is “Are teachers to blame for myriad social and economic problems? Yes or no?” The conservative rendering answers “yes,” and the liberal rendering answers “no”; meanwhile, the discursive bounds limit any possibility of suggesting that the direction of causality should be reversed, i.e. that social and economic structures are to blame for dysfunction within the educational system. With this said, it is now worth revisiting the example above from Eugene Robinson’s piece in the Washington Post, where he says, “It is not fair to expect teachers to correct all the imbalances and remedy all the pathologies that result from growing inequality in society.” His posture here is defensive: He is being sympathetic toward teachers by suggesting that problems entirely out of their control are not their fault. A more critical approach, breaking free of the confines of neoliberal discourse, would be to note that not
only are teachers not the villains in this saga, but they are actually victims of the larger problem of an unequal society in which the public sector – especially the educational sector – has been singled out for austerity and monitory mechanisms of control.

**Finally SOME Discussion of Issues**

This snapshot of news framing around the two teacher strike waves – in 2012 and 2018 – is instructive in demonstrating the range of permissible debate on the role of education in society and how the center of gravity can change based on prevailing social dynamics. Much of the news coverage, especially in 2012, was devoid of serious discussion of issues, instead focusing on the political battles between the two key figures in Chicago: then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel and then- CTU President Karen Lewis. Other coverage, especially in op-eds, would scold teachers for inconveniencing parents by striking (despite polls showing overwhelming support for teachers on the part of the public). And, when issues were discussed, it tended to be in a trivializing way, i.e. focusing narrowly on teacher pay and education spending, while ignoring the myriad other issues teachers raised.

Nonetheless, the 2018 coverage did at least make mention of those few issues, while casting teachers in a significantly more positive light. As already mentioned, this shift was, in part, informed by the fact that the 2018 uprising was far more widespread, so it could not be so easily dismissed as an isolated event. In this case, the news media conceded to a nominally critical view that had become popular with the public. This is consistent with how counterhegemonic views are occasionally allowed to hold sway, albeit in very limited ways. Kumar (2007) relates:
Critical views do find a space in the media through many avenues, even when there is not significant conflict among various social groups. However, these expressions of dissent are not truly significant, because they typically do not set the terms of discussion or impact how the news is gathered, packaged, and sold to the public. (p.50)

So while the 2018 coverage became more sympathetic toward striking teachers, reflective of the success of teachers in using their “signifying power” to shift news media discourse on the role of education in society, this shift did not effectively break with the neoliberal paradigm. The prevailing discourse largely stuck within the bounds set by the evaluative/monitorial register of neoliberalism. The effect of that register on news framing has been to pose the question about whether or not teachers are to blame for larger societal ills, rather than locating those ills in the concerted actions of an elite waging a forty-year counter-offensive on poor and working people.

Nonetheless, the existence of some evidence of a discursive shift in the way teachers were portrayed in these leading news publications is significant. The fact that coverage tended a bit more sympathetic demonstrates the value of the communicative and discursive interventions that teacher activists have undertaken in their tactical shift away from traditional union organizing. While the scope of this study is far too limited to make sweeping conclusions about the interplay between social media discourses and establishment news frames, it is safe to say that there would not have been so much ink spent in 2018 on the problems and injustices in American education had these teachers not taken action and initiated discourses to that effect. By stepping out of the narrow bounds of the bargaining room and into the (digital and literal) streets, teacher activists created a spectacle that even elite news media could not ignore. Moreover, while I do not believe that any of this coverage broke free of the strictures of the neoliberal paradigm,
there most certainly are many captive observers of the teachers’ movement who have potentially become that much more critical of these governing logics. And I believe that most activists would agree that is the broader public whose hearts and minds need to be won over, first and foremost, and not establishment news media practitioners.
Chapter 8: Conclusion: Ideology and Agency in Education

While I spoke briefly about class dynamics in Chapter 4 (alongside a larger discussion of gender), class dynamics have not taken center stage in this dissertation. For one, as I mentioned there, this is because teachers occupy a highly contradictory class position in any society, so that there is no neat bifurcation between classes as there is in traditional industrial workplaces. Moreover, I believe that one glimpses the issues at stake more vividly by focusing on discourses and ideology as they bear on the battles occurring in the educational domain. Lastly, in my analysis, I have argued against any sort of class or economic reductionism because such an approach forecloses on the agency of individuals within this larger story. As such, I find it important to follow Hall’s guidance in seeing “no necessary correspondence” between one’s class position and one’s ideology or actions. As mentioned earlier, plenty of working-class parents have embraced aspects of these reforms because charter schools have occasionally provided a welcome alternative to underfunded local public schools. Likewise, thousands of working-class college graduates have flocked to Teach for America and similar groups, heeding the call to “serve” in schools in marginalized communities. While one could write them off as scabs undermining the teachers’ unions in place, this has not been the tack of CTU and other teacher activists, which have recognized that these recruits mostly mean well, even if the repercussions of their actions have been to undermine the teachers’ unions in place. In short, I reject economic/class reductionism not only because it forecloses on individual agency, but also because it misses the often-messy contradictions present within any social conflict.
Nonetheless, it is also important to not over-correct for economic reductionism by negating or discounting the structural effects. We inhabit a capitalist country wherein economic forces bear heavily on our lived reality, even if they don’t determine that lived reality. Moreover, as I have fleshed out in articulating the history of reform movements in this dissertation, educational policy and practice is heavily influenced by the political aspirations of the economic elite in this country. Indeed, one cannot understand the story of this wave of teacher walkouts and strikes without also understanding the concerted attacks waged by reformers in the interest of aligning education with the interests of capital (Apple, 1986, 1995).

Moreover, in waging these attacks, the elite have an enormous advantage in terms of setting the discursive bounds. Even in times of great political openings – and the late 1960s certainly represented one of those times – dominant forces are able to adjust to public demands by effecting new schemas of exploitation. The shift from Fordism to neoliberalism as a set of governing logics has especially demonstrated this power advantage wielded in the cultural arena, as education has become such a focal point for reformers. Education policy has been singled out as a vector of this social reconstitution, precisely because education plays such a vital role in the meaning-making process of the citizenry: that is, of structuring their value-sets and organizing how they make sense of the world around them.

Nonetheless, I argue that economic and structural forces have a conditioning rather than determining effect on what ultimately plays out in education and other cultural arenas. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in contradistinction to Althusser (1971), who sees economic determinism as being recovered in the “last instance,” I endorse a
Gramscian view wherein the economic forces set the discursive bounds of debate that is not predetermined. Nonetheless, I believe that Althusser’s intervention is quite valuable in recognizing the centrality of education in the process of legitimating and disseminating ruling logics. He recognized the significant shift away from the church to the educational arena in how cultural formation happens in modern societies. His formulation of “ideological state apparatus” as a mechanism of naturalization of the ruling ideology was also highly insightful in how it illuminated the way structure is effectuated in the lived reality of capitalist subjects. In Chapter 3, I suggested that he was neglecting other cultural forces, most notably mass media and popular culture, which also play a substantial role in the cultural formation process.

Here I will extend that argument in contending that the ideological state apparatus needs to be seen as part of a contested process, tempered by cultural practice that often challenges the power of the apparatus to shape the ideologies and worldviews of its subjects. I instead look at the ruling ideology of any hegemonic consensus as containing a composite of the ideological state apparatus and cultural practices. By extension, each component of the social nexus breaks down in similar fashion. The economic domain is a composite of economic structures and the quotidian practices of everyone involved in production: owners, managers, workers, etc. The educational domain is a composite of the educational apparatus (school systems, materials and state-mandated curricula) and educational practice (which, in turn, is a composite of pedagogical practice, the quotidian lived realities of teachers and students, as well as their involvement in the community and any activism that they might participate in); the political domain is a composite of the political apparatus (political structures, parties, organizations and the influence held by
powerful forces over the existing political machinery) and the political practice of all participants in the political arena; and popular culture/mass media is a composite of the cultural apparatus and the cultural practices of both those creating cultural texts and those consuming them. Meanwhile, hegemonic consensus is reached through the dialectical interplay of the various ideological state apparatuses and the practices associated with the domains in which those apparatuses function.

Elite forces hold the privileged capacity to set the shape of these ideological apparatuses, in large part due to their influence over the economic domain. Moreover, the breadth of the economy is more far-reaching than any of the cultural arenas. Any individual can live outside of the purview of education after completing the days of compulsory education, but one can never opt out of the market economy in which they live. Furthermore, one’s position within that economy – i.e. one’s social relation vis-à-vis capital – defines much of one’s role throughout the cultural nexus. As demonstrated in the history I delineated in chapters 2 and 3, it was economic conditions (namely, the crisis of stagflation) that ultimately gave rise to the political project of neoliberalism and all of its political and cultural manifestations. Nonetheless, in the circuits of communication, there is a feedback loop through which cultural practice circulates back through to the economic apparatus.

In other words, the inputs in the various cultural arenas make a difference. I contend that education is particularly impactful, given its centrality in the formation and cultivation process: its sheer power in inculcating young people with various sets of values and ways of thinking about the world. While I believe that Althusser oversimplified the role of education – reducing it to a role of reproducing governing
logics – I believe that he was right about its importance in harnessing ideology. He is also right about there being an effective apparatus of sorts, composed of the educational architecture that teachers must work with, including the tests, metrics, oversight boards, administrators and reform movements that place pressure to steer pedagogy in a more controlled and technical direction. Nonetheless, teachers have agency in their quotidian classroom practice, as well as in their relations with students, parents, and the broader school community. They also have the agency to organize collectively, both through formal union channels and otherwise.

As a result, students are not merely injected with a specific ideology by the educational apparatus. Instead, their experience is one that interfaces with the contradictions of an educational arena that contains the apparatus as well as the various practices of the educational community (including the students themselves). And what this community does has an impact.

I believe that this project has illuminated the impact that collective action by members of the educational community can have. Not only were teachers able to realize significant material gains in terms of pay and funding increases in several jurisdictions, they were also able to shift the discourse around the role of education in society. In looking at newspaper coverage from 2012 to 2018, I charted a noteworthy shift away from overtly negative coverage framing teachers as selfish rabble rousers not looking out for the good of their students. Instead, the uprising of 2018 was largely treated as a legitimate social movement addressing very real problems associated with funding and pay deficits. While I argued that even the critical coverage remained within the bounds set by neoliberal discourse, the shift to the left bounds of discourse makes a difference.
By pushing elite news media to this left boundary, teachers have primed the domain of educational discourses for a potential radical break down the line.

Likewise, teachers have used digital communication technologies to network around common grievances, much like other “movements of the squares” that have arisen during this same era. They have benefitted from the networking affordances of these digital communication technologies, which have helped them to overcome some of the organizational shortcomings of the existing union architecture. These unions had increasingly become compromised by a neoliberal legal framework that prevented it from addressing the broad range of issues impacting teachers, their schools and the communities that they work within. However, as I argued in Chapter 5, those unions served a vital purpose, providing an institutional anchor that has permitted this movement to evade the problem of ephemerality that has plagued other movements during this wave of contestation.

Teachers have been operating in conditions not of their own making, but that are, rather, the results of structural forces beyond their own control. But within that architecture – the educational apparatus – they have been able to organize movements of resistance to the attacks waged by elite reformers on their professional autonomy and economic well-being. Likewise, they have had to negotiate with an elite news media that has set the discursive bounds of debate in such a way that coverage tends to talk about education in terms of the economic malaise that teachers are supposedly responsible for. And yet, through their organizing, teachers have been able to shift the bounds of that debate in a more favorable direction. Meanwhile, teacher activists have provided a model of resistance for movements emerging out of neoliberalism’s moment of crisis: one
involving a marriage between old forms and tactics left over from the Fordist era of workplace organizations and new mechanisms of resistance on social media. Teacher power in the digital age emerges out of the tense interface between these old and new forms, together with the power that comes from existing within a central cultural institution involved in social reproduction. They have shown that activists cannot rely on communicative and discursive interventions alone – indeed, movements must be materially grounded to succeed – but, at the same time, it is also important to contest power at the discursive level. Communicating with the public is vitally important, especially in an era where so much of the elite framing of unions depicts striking workers as profligate leeches feasting at the public troughs. It is only through messaging and reframing their movement as being a “battle for the soul of education” that teachers have been able to contest that dominant framing and build a sustainable movement for an educational system that serves the public good and not just narrow needs of capital.
Appendix: Teacher Interview Questions

1) What are your main reasons for participating in this movement?

2) What are some of the central issues facing teachers in [insert state] that this movement seeks to address?

3) How do you see this movement fitting into the larger wave of teacher actions going on around the country in other states?

4) What inspiration, if any, did you take from Chicago teacher activists in the CORE slate?

5) In what ways do you feel that teacher working conditions impact the learning environment?

6) In what ways do you feel that the movement has been able to transform the larger conversation around education policy?

7) How would you describe news media portrayals of the movement?

8) How have you used social media and other digital communication technologies, and how vital have they been in growing the movement, and in countering portrayals of the movement in the mass media?

9) How would you describe the role of education in society? In what ways do you think that this movement has been able to shift the larger conversation about education in this country?
References


