

“Harvard of the Poor” as Racial Myth

Racism and the City University of New York, 1960-1969

Tahir H. Butt

November 2, 2017 (rev Nov 12)

From its founding in the 19th century, City College has been associated with an egalitarian and democratic mission. That mission was best reflected in its reputation as the “Harvard of the Poor”. And, central to that mission was the fact that New York City’s municipal colleges had maintained a policy of free tuition for over 150 years until the fiscal crisis that crippled the city in the 1970s. However, for fifty years before the policy was finally terminated, City College enrolled a growing number of tuition-paying students. As tuition-free education became a privilege for the few, admission requirements become more selective. Therefore, by the 1960s, the “Harvard of the Poor” had become more myth than mission.

This myth took on a racial dimension because of the shifts in the city’s demographics after the Second World War. As a million white residents migrated out and as many black Southerners along with Puerto Ricans migrated in, the city’s public schools were transformed. But the admission policies of the municipal colleges effectively excluded these two social groups. In the context of sharpening racial conflict, particularly around segregated education, the absence of black students from the City University of New York became a cause for concern, among the social groups excluded as well as university administrators. However, rather than countenance even minor reforms, defenders of the status quo, both inside and outside the university, offered the mission and ideals of City College as justification for why the college had, and could, remain predominantly white.

Equality of opportunity at City College



Figure 1: The Free Academy Building, pre-1890

City College of New York is 170 years old today. Its predecessor, the Free Academy, was created in 1847, by a public referendum in which 85 percent of the city's voters approved the creation of a tax-supported public academy. The Free Academy, as stated in the original act, was created for "the purpose of extending the benefits of education gratuitously to persons who have been pupils in the common schools." *Gratuitous*, in this sense, was meant as free of charge.

The President of the Board of Education at the time, who had proposed the Free Academy, famously proclaimed "Open the doors to all—let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together, and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect." City College, which would be new name of the Free

Academy once it began granting bachelor degrees in 1866, was founded with the mission of equal opportunity grounded in egalitarian and democratic ideals unique at that time. But, as this proclamation also made explicit, this mission would only extend to those students who could demonstrate qualification: equal opportunity, but for only those who deserved it.

For its first fifty years, when few aspired to education past primary education, the limits of opportunity at City College were not yet readily apparent. But, as demand grew, admission policies increasingly focused on individual merit in order to select only the best qualified. Based on a narrow construction of merit as high school grades and standardized test scores, allocating a scarce tuition-free education effectively became virtue of the system rather than a departure from its egalitarian and democratic mission. Fundamentally, the meritocracy that emerged in the twentieth century was legitimated as leveling the playing field since each individual would be admitted on their demonstrated intellectual ability rather than social traits. While color-blind by definition, meritocracy proved a racial myth since it was used to evade how racism continued to make the playing field far from level.

“Harvard of the Poor” as myth

For the children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, City College’s admission policies and free tuition opened opportunity otherwise closed off by the discriminatory practices of employers and private colleges, like Columbia. For the Jewish poor, City College was “Harvard of the Poor,” in part, because of quotas at Harvard. But that reputation was also a product of policy changes in the same period that made admission to City College more selective. In 1924, a required high school average was introduced for gaining admission to city college. This was necessary because the number of city students qualified for and seeking admission to City College had increased.

Though begun as tuition-free, there had never been adequate tax money to provide enough of it for the city’s public colleges. Increasing grade requirements at City College effectively rationed free higher education. As admission requirements continued to climb, the rationing that had originally been an unfortunate necessity because of

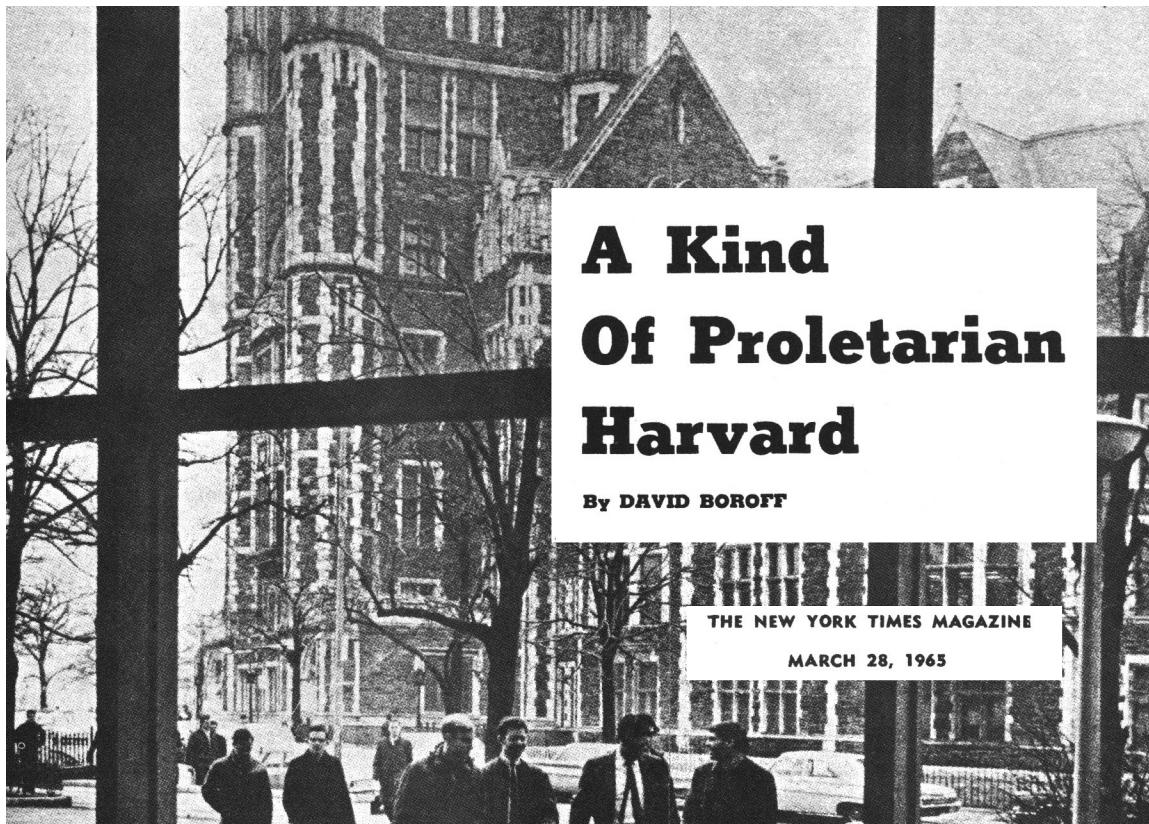


Figure 2: Special feature in New York Times on CUNY, 1965

business opposition to taxes, became a virtue of the municipal college system. Free public higher education, though by law a universal public good, became a tuition-free scholarships for the most deserving in the context of scarcity.

By 1961, when the loosely-coordinated four municipal colleges were consolidated into one citywide system, the City University of New York (CUNY), City College was no longer for the city's poor. Admission requirements had risen throughout the 1950s and would continue to as the children of the postwar baby boom graduated high school. In a special *New York Times* feature on the municipal system published in 1965, David Boroff, a graduate of Brooklyn College, noted that "the students themselves have unquestionably changed"; they were no longer "the children of pants pressers and pushcart peddlers." Instead, the students at CUNY were increasingly viewed as an academically elite whose families could afford to pay tuition.

Rising admission requirements in the postwar period effectively excluded the city's black students who were, more than ever, trapped in inferior segregated schools. For them, the myth City College as educating the city's poor became part the liberal racism in New York City that justified racial inequality at home.

A liberalism which is truly liberal

It is against this backdrop, we turn our attention to a speech that Martin Luther King Jr. gave at City College on June 12, 1963. An estimated 15,000 people were gathered that day for commencement ceremonies. Even with such a large audience, King had not yet gained the prominence as a national leader he would after the March on Washington later that summer. In fact, the *New York Times* only briefly remarked on the special speaker at commencement and no mention of his speech made it into the page of the *Amsterdam News*.

King's appearance came at a critical juncture in the Southern civil rights struggle. The invitation to speak at commencement the previous month had arrived when King was helping lead the desegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. The night before commencement, President John F. Kennedy had delivered a speech on live television to introduce federal civil rights legislation. Indeed, Kennedy had begun the speech by addressing threats of violence following federal desegregation efforts at the University

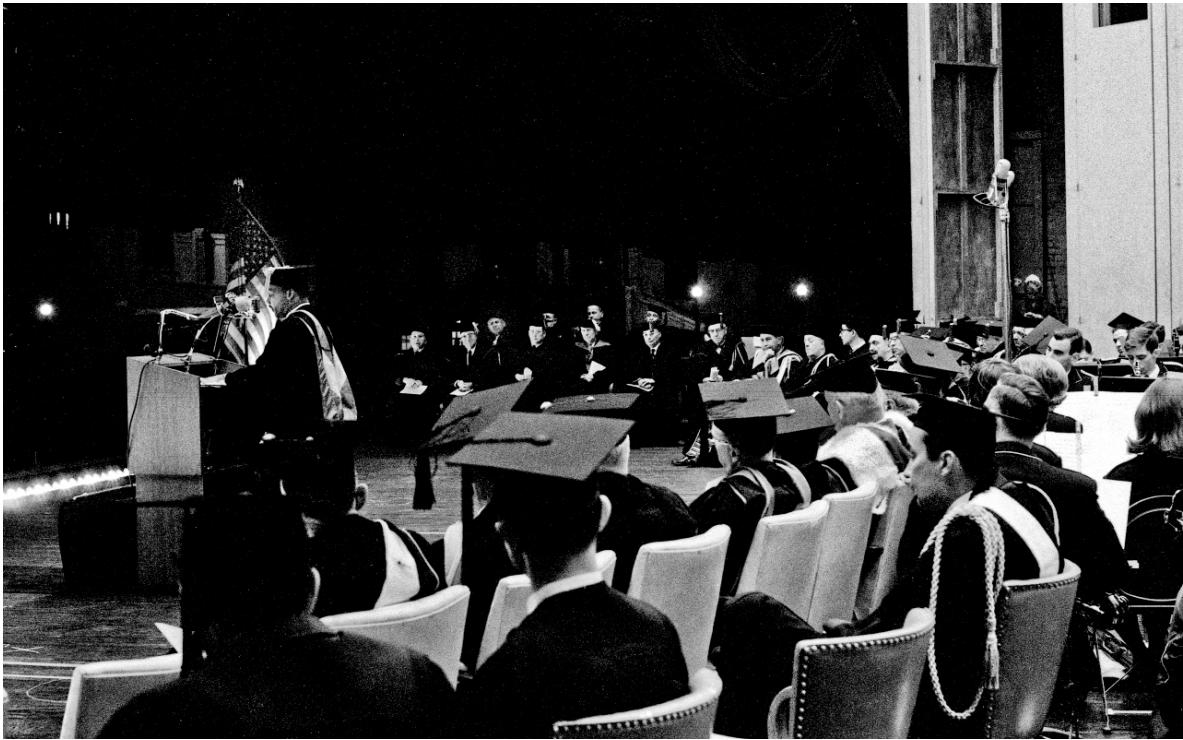


Figure 3: Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at City College commencement, June 1963

of Alabama. And, tragically, on the morning of commencement day, Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary in Mississippi, was assassinated in front of his home. In his speech to City College graduates later that day, King captured the turbulence of the moment by contrasting the “sunlight of reason” expressed in Kennedy’s speech to the “sullen cloud” of the murder of Medger Evers.

Though attention was directed southward, racial injustice was certainly not a problem unique to the South for King. He had already spoken of a “pressing need” for “a liberalism in the North which is truly liberal, a liberalism that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South.” King echoed that message at commencement when he called upon the graduates to “see that the de facto segregation of the north is as injurious to the Negro student as the legal segregation of the south.” Though King did not mention it directly, his appeal to a predominantly white graduating class highlighted the absence of Black graduates at commencement. In the City College 1963 yearbook, fewer than 36 black graduates appear among the 2,800 bachelor degrees granted, or less than 2 percent. While the *New York Times* was quick to note the number of graduates was the highest it had been since 1950, it failed to mention

that the total number of Black graduates had not changed over the intervening fifteen years.

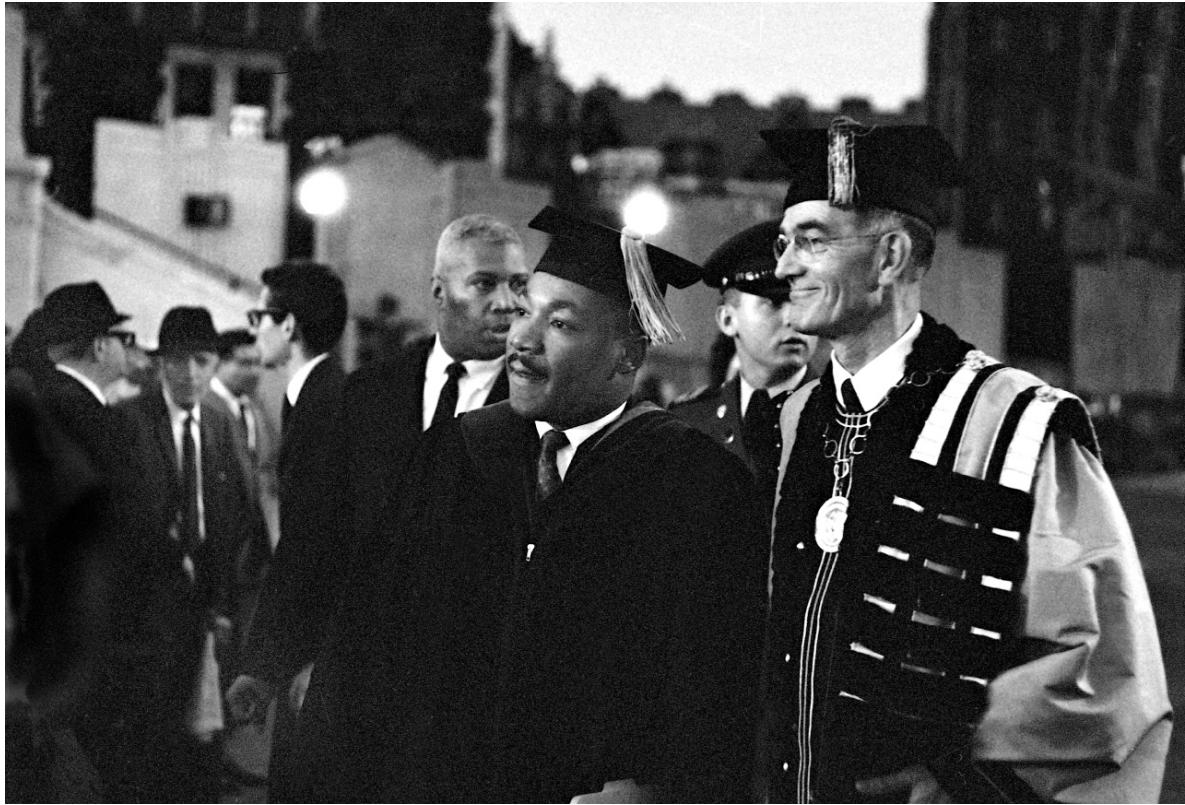


Figure 4: Martin Luther King Jr. and Buell Gallagher

King at commencement, in traditional academic dress, foreshadows his words two years later, after a summer of urban rebellions, when he admonished Northern liberals:

Many of them sat on platforms with all the imposing regalia of office to welcome me to their cities, and showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes. Yet when the issues were joined concerning local conditions only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal.

The City College President Buell Gallagher, pictured above alongside King, was very much the Northern liberal that King had in mind. Before City College, Gallagher had been the president a historically black private college in Alabama. He had also been elected to the board of directors of the NAACP in 1943 and served on the that board for 30 years. Gallagher's self-satisfied smile in this photograph from commencement belies the limits of his own liberalism as well as that of City College. At the 1963

commencement, the college welcomed a Southern civil rights leader even as it could turned away most of the black students educated down the hill in Harlem. Gallagher rallied the audience to the cause of civil rights but also applauded a predominantly white graduating class in a city that had close a million black residents.

The meritocratic immunity of racial liberalism



Figure 5: Offices of the Board of Higher Education

The meritocratic ideals at the heart of City College immunized Gallagher and university administrators to charges of racial discrimination. When charges of discrimination were leveled, as they would be throughout the 1960s, administrators and policy makers could always point to how meritocratic admissions requirements were, in fact, race neutral. But, being blind to the race of the student, meritocracy served to justify racial inequality.

In 1959, the Board of Higher Education, the local governing body of the municipal

colleges, convened a special committee to propose policies for the municipal college system. Aware of the demographic changes in the city's public school, the committee concluded that fewer of the city's high school graduates students would be able to meet the high admission requirements of the public colleges. But rather than countenance even minor reforms, the committee warned against lowering admission requirements since it would only lead to a greater number of students vying for seats in already crowded classrooms. Instead, the committee's recommendation to the Board was to keep admission requirements higher for the few tuition-free seats in the day session and to add tuition-charging seats in the less selective evening sessions and community colleges.

We know the full extent of their exclusion from tuition-free CUNY only because of a federal decree that forced CUNY administration to conduct its first demographic survey in 1967. The findings were especially damning. Black students were only 3.6 percent of the total matriculated enrollment at the more selective four-year colleges. Black students were more likely to be enrolled in the less selective two-year community colleges, where they accounted for 13 percent. Most significantly, 60 percent of all Black students enrolled at CUNY were never admitted under existing admission requirements and were instead paying tuition as non-matriculants.

Therefore, the growing stratification within CUNY reinforced the exclusion experienced by most of the city's black students. Indeed, the structure of racial inequality imposed a double penalty on black students. High admission requirements meant that nearly all black students educated in the city's segregated schools were excluded from the benefits of a social provision their families paid taxes towards. Furthermore, those few black students that did enroll, more often than not paid tuition. Black students thus disproportionately bore the additional burden of financing tuition-free education from which they had been excluded.

The enduring legacy of racial liberalism

Rather than redress its growing racial problem, CUNY doubled down on the meritocratic ideals that had created racial disparities. Indeed, the endurance of racial inequality at CUNY over the course of the decade is the context for student protests led by



Figure 6: Students at anti-tuition rally, 1976

black and Puerto Rican across the CUNY campuses in 1969. When several hundred students occupied the South Campus of City College on April 21, 1969, they precipitated a political crisis that finally lowered admissions requirements and opened admissions to CUNY to all of the city's high school graduates. The Open Admissions policy quickly transformed the municipal system, increasing freshmen enrollments by 75 percent in one year.

The failure of earlier efforts to reform CUNY's admissions reveals how its liberal ideals were a barrier to racial equality. In December 1963, at a meeting of the City College faculty union, a recently appointed member of the Board of Higher Education, the Black trade unionist Benjamin F. McLaurin, called for reforming CUNY's admissions to increase the number of Black students. He proposed that five to ten percent of the freshman class every year be admitted not based on high school grades. Instead, these students would be nominated by their high school principals for admission to the municipal colleges even though they had not met minimum grade requirements for admission. Though color-blind by definition, McLaurin hoped that the city's racial and ethnic minorities would disproportionately benefit from the policy.

Even a reform that left much of the meritocratic system intact, such as the one McLaurin had proposed, was quickly shot down as a form of racial preference. In a letter published in the *New York Times*, the chairman of the Board of Higher Education evaded the racial problem entirely by denying the problem even existed. He retorted that CUNY, in fact, had the largest percentage of Black and Puerto Rican undergraduates of any university in the country. In another letter published in the *Times* a few days later, a Hunter College student went so far as to criticize the premise of McLaurin's proposal: "That City College is situated in a Negro area does not entitle Negroes to admission any more than the location of Cooper Union in the Bowery entitles derelicts to admission."

These responses illustrate the limits of racial equality under the existing system. A 1964 report to the State senate had concluded that a comparison of CUNY to the Jim Crow South was "bitterly ironic." Though the Black population of New York City was approximately the same as it was in all of Louisiana, the report estimated the more selective, tuition-free senior colleges enrolled only 1,000 Black students whereas Louisiana's state colleges enrolled more than 10,000. "New York City's education is infinitely better," the report admitted, "but of what good is a superior education to a racial group or one of its members against whom college entrance doors are barred."

In a 1968 essay, Addison Gayle, a City College instructor and noted critic on black literature, wrote it was “criminal that a college so close, a college originally designed for poor people, has not opened its doors to them”. Those doors finally opened once black and Puerto Rican students occupied City College in April 1969. During their occupation, these students shed the myth of City College as the “Harvard of the Poor” when they renamed it “The University of Harlem.”

The meritocratic ideal lives on, even though tuition-free CUNY has long past, and remains a barrier for achieving equality in our racially segregated educational system.