

# **“Harvard of the Poor” as Racial Myth**

**Racial Inequality at City University of New York, 1960-1969**

Tahir H. Butt

November 2, 2017

Good evening! Before I begin, I want to thank Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard for inviting me to tonight's conversation. They have been generous mentors to me over the past three years.

My talk tonight addresses the City University of New York in the 1960s. I will focus in particular on City College of New York, the oldest of the four-year municipal colleges and only a short walk from the Schomburg Library, where we are gathered tonight. I believe the case of City College and CUNY helps us grapple with the enduring legacy of Northern racism.

Certainly, the image of City College as "Harvard of the Poor" has loomed large in its 170 years of existence. City College has from its beginning been associated with an egalitarian and democratic mission. In particular, it is well-known to have been tuition-free the city's fiscal crisis in the 70s. However, this history is incomplete. For fifty years before it was terminated, City College and the other municipal colleges—Hunter, Brooklyn, and Queens—enrolled a growing number of tuition-paying students, first in its in its less selective evening sessions, and later in community colleges. Indeed, admission to the tuition-free day session at City College prior to 1969 was as selective as those at Harvard or Columbia.

Tonight, I want to address how the image of the "Harvard of the Poor" served as a racial myth in postwar New York. As racial conflict sharpened around education inequalities the meritocratic ideals of City College were used by policy makers and defenders of the status quo to justify why the college had and could remain predominantly white.

# 1 Equality of opportunity at City College



Figure 1.1: 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, would be for “**the purpose of extending the benefits of education gratuitously to persons who have been pupils in the common schools.**” **Gratuitous** was meant in the sense that it would be 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.**” In effect, City College, which would be the name given to the new academy in 1866 once it began granting bachelor degrees, was founded with the mission of equal opportunity. But, as this proclamation makes explicit, that mission would only extend to those students who could demonstrate certain traits, marking everyone else who did not qualify under this criteria as undeserving. For its first fifty years, when few aspired to higher education, the limits of opportunity at City College were not yet apparent.

Compared to admissions based on social class or ability of a family to pay for college education, admission to City College seemed less susceptible to certain underlying social biases. But the ideal of meritocracy, central to the mission of the college, was deeply problematic. The meritocratic ideal assumed the college could narrowly define the “intellect” of individual students, initially based on entrance exams and later on high school grades. Based on a narrow construction of merit, the benefits of tuition-free education were bestowed upon those deemed deserving. Fundamentally, the ideal of meritocracy in admissions assumed a level playing field, where each individual has the same chance of success. But racism makes the playing field far from level

## 2 “Harvard of the Poor” as myth

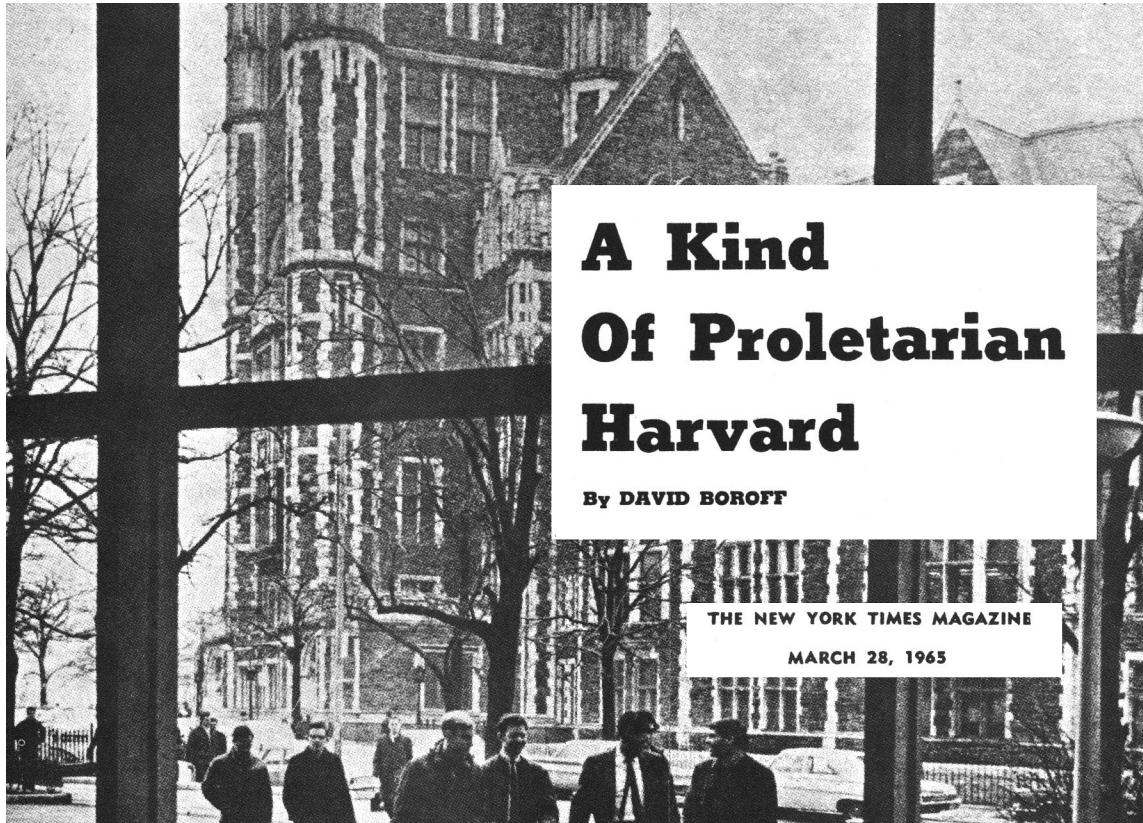


Figure 2.1: Special feature in New York Times on CUNY, 1965

The nickname “Harvard of the Poor” has been long associated with City College. The image **originated from policy changes starting in the 1920s**. 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 admission to City College and seeking higher education had increased. Especially for the children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived at the turn of the century, City College’s

meritocratic admission policies opened opportunity otherwise closed off by the discriminatory practices of employers and private colleges, like Columbia.

**Though begun as tuition-free, there was never 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 business opposition to tax increases, became a virtue of the college. In effect, the free public higher education in New York City was transformed from a universal public good into tuition-free scholarships for the most deserving.

In 1961, the loosely-coordinated four municipal colleges were consolidated into one citywide system, the City University of New York (CUNY). By then, though, these colleges were no longer for the city's poor. In a special New York Times feature on CUNY 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 had come to be viewed as an academically elite whose families could afford to pay tuition. Indeed, admission requirements had been rising throughout the 1950s and would continue to do so in the 1960s, hitting record levels as the children of the postwar baby boom graduated high school.

One of the main victims of rising admission requirements in the postwar period were the city's Black population who were, more than ever, trapped in inferior segregated schools. As nearly a million white residents left New York City after the Second World War, an equal number of black Southerners and Puerto Ricans migrated to the city, looking for jobs and educational opportunity. Yet, while these two groups grew to half of the city's public school population, they accounted for less than 5 percent of the tuition-free students at City College.

### 3 A liberalism which is truly liberal

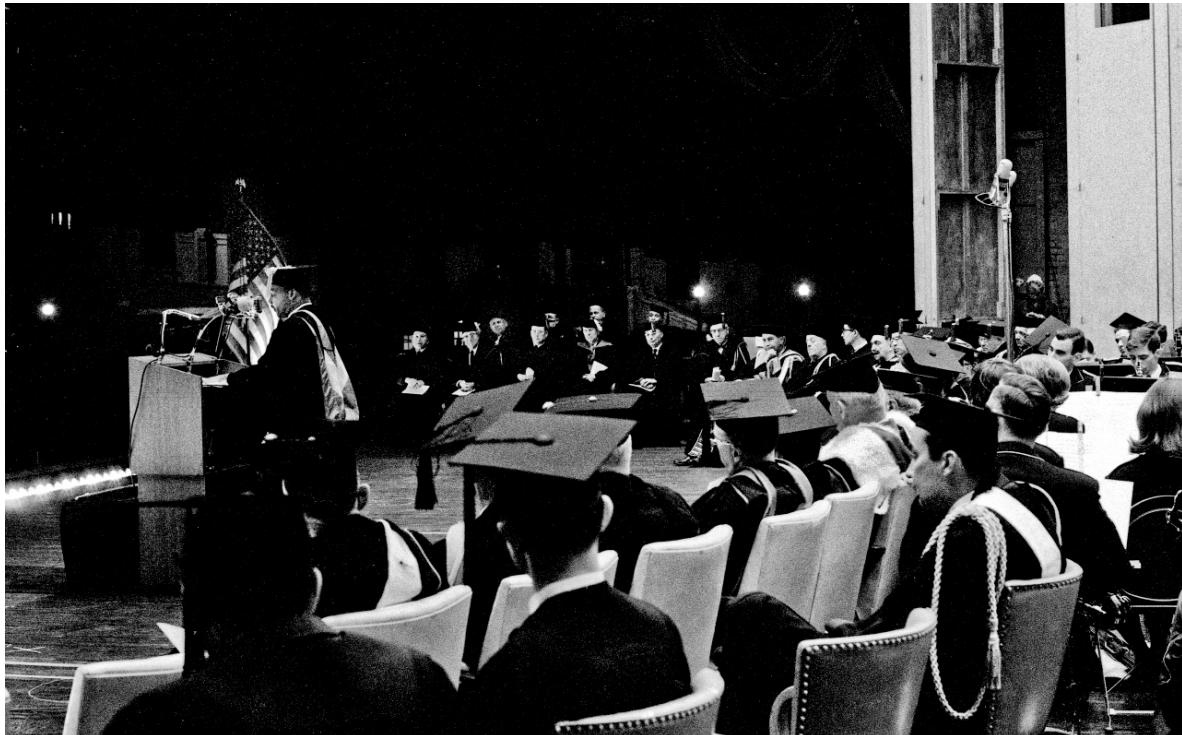


Figure 3.1: Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at City College commencement, June 1963

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 strug-**

gle. King received the invitation to speak at commencement the previous month when he was helping lead a 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 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, for King, racial injustice was not a problem unique to the South. King 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.”** At commencement, King echoed that message, calling 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.”**

However, the absence of Black graduates at the City College commencement tells us much about the Northern liberal version of Jim Crow to which King was addressing. If you go through the yearbook from that graduating class, you’ll find fewer than 36 black graduates among the 2,800 bachelor degrees granted, or less than 2 percent. Though 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.

## 4 The self-satisfying liberalism of City College

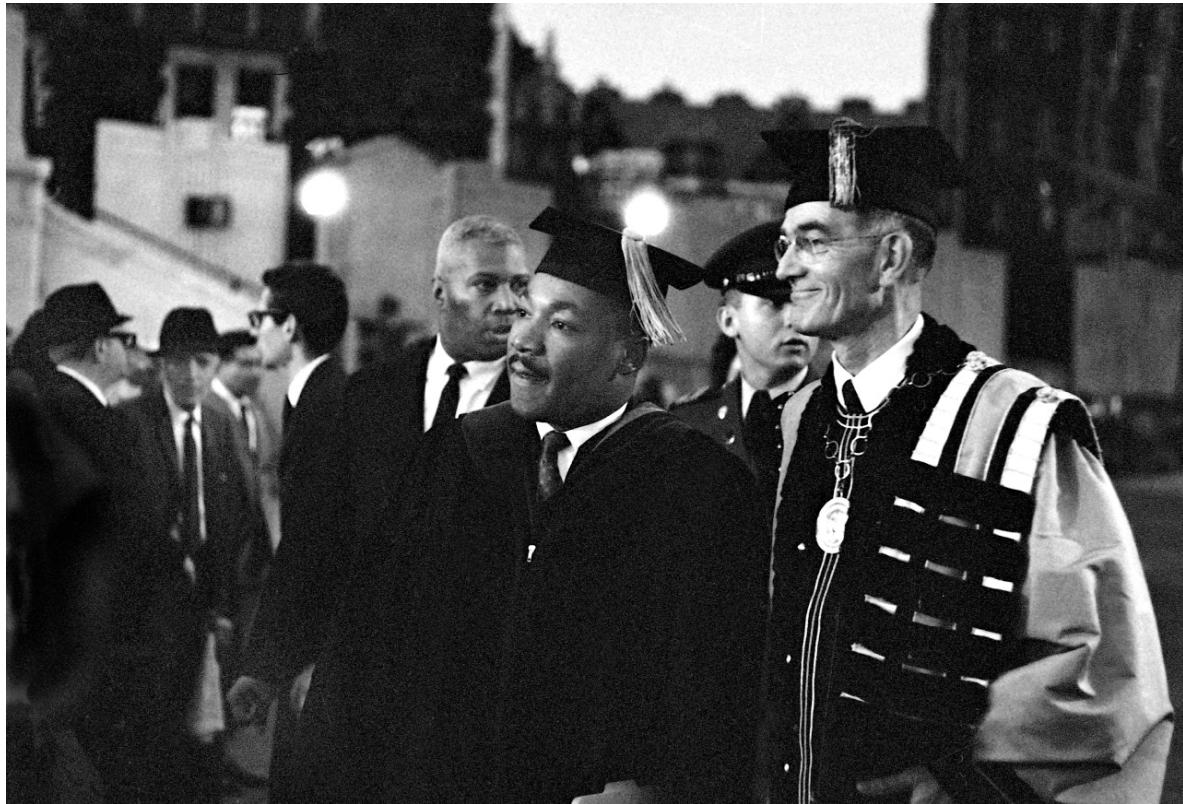


Figure 4.1: Martin Luther King Jr. and Buell Gallagher

The image of King at commencement, in traditional academic regalia, 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 here with King, had extended the invitation to the Southern leader. 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 was a **prototypical Northern liberal**, the sort that King had spoken of time and time again. His self-satisfied smile in this photograph from commencement belies the limits of the City College version of Northern racism. The college embraced a Southern civil rights leader even as it could turned away many of the black students down the hill in Harlem. They rallied the audience to the cause of civil rights even as they applauded a predominantly white graduating class in a city that had close a million black residents.

## 5 Meritocratic immunity of racial liberalism



Figure 5.1: Offices of the Board of Higher Education

The **meritocratic ideals immunized CUNY to charges of racial discrimination**. Administrators and politicians could always point to the color-blind meritocratic admissions requirements. But, being blind to the race of the student, meritocracy, in fact, served to justify the racial inequality it produced.

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

colleges, convened a special committee to propose policies for the soon-to-be-named CUNY system. The committee found that demographic changes in the city's public school, more of whom were graduating high school with lower grades, would mean fewer of the city's students would be able to meet the high admission requirements. Rather than countenance even minor reforms, it 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.**

The stratification within CUNY that developed proved injurious to the city's black students. 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.**

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 at CUNY more often than not paid tuition. Therefore black students disproportionately bore the additional burden of financing tuition-free education for matriculated students in the day session.

## 6 Enduring legacy of racial liberalism



Figure 6.1: Students at anti-tuition rally, 1976

Instead of redressing its growing racial problem, **CUNY doubled down in the 1960s 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 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.

But, looking to the failure of **earlier efforts to reform** CUNY's admissions reveals how meritocracy had been 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 but instead on potential. These students would be nominated by 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.

However, even a reform, such as the one McLaurin had proposed, that remained committed to meritocratic ideals was quickly shot down. 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 to even minor reform 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.