Book Notes

NONPROFIT NEIGHBORHOODS: AN URBAN HISTORY OF INEQUALITY AND THE AMERICAN STATE

by Claire Dunning

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 336 pp. $30.00 (paper), $29.99 (pdf).

The executive director of a youth-serving education nonprofit that I work with in Boston told me once, “If you throw a rock in the city of Boston, you’ll hit a nonprofit.” Claire Dunning’s *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* chronicles in an engaging, informative, and deeply provocative way how and why this executive director’s claim is exactly right.

In 2015, for example, Boston Public Schools created a partnership program known as PartnerBPS to support school-community nonprofit partners. Their publicly available portal network of current collaborators lists 244 education nonprofits supporting 125 schools (PartnerBPS, 2023).[1] It is clear that nonprofits emerged to help plug the gaps of some of the most persistent and long-lasting problems in public schools, particularly in majority nonwhite and low-income urban school districts. This mirrors the role of nonprofits presented in *Nonprofit Neighborhoods,* which contends that the most “economically and socially distressed neighborhoods in the twenty-first century are also those with the most neighborhood nonprofits” (250) and illuminates the historical reliance on nonprofit organizations and coalitions to solve two of the most persistent issues in American society: poverty and inequality.

Dunning uses the city of Boston to unravel the complicated and important history of how nonprofits have come to dominate urban governance in the United States. Using nonprofit exemplars and specific grant processes, in her book she paints a poignant historical picture from the post–World War II period through the new millennium, detailing how government retreated from its direct role in providing a social safety net and instead relied on nonprofit intermediaries to deliver social services. She argues that Boston is the archetype, illustrating the creation, implementation, and continuation of “nonprofit neighborhoods”—a system of urban governance where public funds and unelected authority flow through nonprofit entities to support a myriad of social goals (14). Consequently, she argues, nonprofit organizations

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act as frontline workers for historically marginalized and disenfranchised peoples, communities, and the entire city. *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* tells the story of Boston in ways that illuminate the inherently contradictory realities of nonprofits that both limit democratic processes while also offering avenues for social change and coalition building to disenfranchised peoples. In effect, this allows the book to speak to all academic disciplines and sectors.

While Dunning's book is not specific to the education field, its core argument connecting the rise of inequality and the growth of nonprofits is inextricably linked with public education. Boston Public Schools (BPS), just like public schools across the US, are increasingly educating more low-income students (Suitts, 2013), and Boston schools and their corresponding neighborhoods remain highly segregated (Scharfenberg, 2020). As public schools continue to be praised as America's great equalizer, their inability to meet that demand has prompted policy makers to turn to nonprofits to support public school students' myriad needs.

Dunning carries the reader through seven chapters tracking public money through nonprofits. Each chapter's title focuses on a group of stakeholders—the city, grantees, residents, bureaucrats, lenders, partners, and coalitions—and describes the decade-by-decade restructuring of a governance system that elevated public-private partnerships. Tied to the 1960s-era freedom movements and political pressures of the growing popularity of neoliberalism as an ideology and prevailing political practice, neighborhood nonprofits bloomed unevenly (17). Dunning details the urban renewal development at this time and how it "mandated comprehensive planning, encouraged partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit private entities and established new ties between federal and municipal government agencies" (26). She foreshadows urban renewal as the mechanism that launched the nonprofit neighborhood model that swept the nation under President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and Great Society programming.

Each chapter and corresponding stakeholder group bolsters Dunning's overall argument. In chapter 1 readers are introduced to Muriel Snowden, who, alongside her husband, Otto, founded Freedom House in 1949 to "improve the civic, educational, recreational, and general welfare" of Upper Roxbury, a neighborhood that was/is predominantly Black and had/s been intentionally marginalized and disenfranchised since the Great Migration and resulting white flight. Freedom House evolved from a grassroot, Black-led volunteer network with social justice aims to an established community nonprofit rooted and led by people from and within the community. This development, however, didn't come without its critics. By 1961, Freedom House signed a formal contract to partner in urban renewal efforts with the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), a public agency that served as the municipal planning and development agency. The partnership was touted as a victory for citizen participation in the urban renewal process, but it also sparked backlash as Black Bostonians remained unable to afford housing in their neighborhoods

(48). Freedom House became the intermediary to public-backed change as the "community broker" and yet seemingly sidestepped the most marginalized with many Black residents and organizers openly critiquing Freedom House as having an "integrationist vision and middle-class orientation" (48). While Freedom House began as a community space led and designed by people from the community, the power and influence of money dictated changes that the organization may not have originally espoused. This was intentionally designed by government actors who viewed the partnership with community organizations as the "human side of renewal," Dunning writes, "where the municipal agency the BRA, coordinated and planned for the physical and economic development of Boston, this other entity [Freedom House] would manage the city's social and cultural development as part of a two-pronged attack on poverty" (42).

The two-pronged attack on poverty—public agencies and nonprofit intermediaries—continues to operate today, with public education as a central battleground site. Public schools are, in theory, accessible and free to all students regardless of background. Seen as partners today, education nonprofits are positioned as supplementary academic, social, and cultural developmental programs for some city students that are not holistically getting their needs met in their public schools. These decisions are often shaped by so-called hard data like standardized test scores and graduation rates that visibly and digestibly highlight the achievement and opportunity gaps between students by race, class, and gender (among other variables). While Dunning does not focus on public education as a whole, she does weave into her examination how the education sector was always a contentious site of public nonprofit intervention. Specifically, Dunning chronicles Boston's desegregation plans in the early 1970s as an exemplarily nonprofit neighborhood policy decision.

In chapter 4 Dunning uses the 1974 Boston busing crisis to showcase the decentralized network of public and private entities that took the city by storm as Community Development Block Grants became commonplace during the Nixon administration and flooded local municipal policy. As Dunning describes, "The federal program empowered city bureaucrats to make decisions based on local circumstances but also left room for favoritism and prejudice to steer public resources into some neighborhoods over others" (143). The block grants provided local control and flexibility, but they also came with their own short-term, and often racially biased, agenda.

Importantly, throughout the book Dunning highlights the subtle and explicit ways band-aid solutions to racial inequality, racial discrimination, and racial segregation undergirded the development of nonprofit neighborhoods. She introduces in chapter 2 nonprofits like Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) that circumnavigated the declining and more restrictive public dollars by increasing their intake of private external philanthropic sources to support their missions. However, competitive grant making for private money burdened nonprofits like ABCD to appeal to funders with innovative and flashy solutions for complex structural problems (58). ABCD expanded its mission to align with funder goals—a pivot that is well known in the nonprofit scholarly landscape and often referred to as "mission drift" (Weisbrod, 2004).

Shifts for funding is one thing, but, as *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* eloquently outlines, nonprofits' twists and turns for public and private dollars deepened assumptions that "local solutions could address structural problems, that increasing participation via private routes could substitute for a sharing of public power, and that improved programs or services could reduce poverty" (58). Sources of public and private dollars bolstered the ideology that caring for individualized case-by-case services could solve the systemic shortcomings of dealing with pervasive poverty (95), particularly amid the neoliberal turn of the 1970s. The same patterns exist in the historical and contemporary public education systems. The more we demand of our schools to solve poverty without additional social services from the government, the more education nonprofits may emerge to supplement and haphazardly meet the demand.

While Dunning's nonprofit neighborhood framework gives voice to often marginalized voices in academic scholarship (such as grassroot organizations), it also repeats certain historical moments and grant processes with slightly confusing and overlapping transitions, where certain nonprofits are introduced and reintroduced chapter by chapter. Occasionally this is because of historical name changes and restructuring; a diagram or visual depicting the organizations mentioned in the book would have supported the reader in tracking their growth and agendas overtime. Moreover, Dunning takes on a range of nonprofit entities from large-scale community development corporations created to support affordable housing in cities to smaller grassroots community-based nonprofits like Freedom House. While Dunning doesn't explicitly untether the reality that both of these types of 501c(3) organizations are substantially different, both in size and their orientation toward distinct social goals, a clarification of their difference could have helped the reader understand how diverse and widespread nonprofit neighborhoods have become.

While *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* will likely not be found in the "education" section at a local bookstore, it is an important read for education policy makers, scholars, principals, teachers, and students in how issues of poverty, racism, and privatization impact cities and schools. As public schools in cities across the United States continue to be underfunded and under attack, with books stripped from school libraries and extreme limitations placed on curricula (Alleyne, 2022), the growing coalition of organizations, resources, and power funneling through nonprofits continues to expand. While many nonprofits are aiming to do important work, their signaling and band-aid attempts to support historically marginalized populations may only make it easier to not address the real issues at hand—growing poverty and rising inequality.

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Notes

1. Unlike most large urban public school districts, Boston Public Schools has a Partnership Office with a website that features a publicly available and searchable database. That said, it is impossible to name with complete certainty the number of education nonprofit partners operating in and around BPS. However, by exploring the database and searching "Find a Program," I uncovered 244 unique organizations currently listed as partners. Considering the decentralization of education nonprofits, this number may be even higher.

References

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