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The Social Order of New York City

Elmhurst-Corona is located near the geographic center of New York City. In common parlance, however, it is part of "the outer boroughs"; the city's center or core is downtown and midtown Manhattan. Every day legions of outer-borough residents pour into this Manhattan core to work. New York's upper and upper middle classes live mainly in central Manhattan and in a few high-income outlying sections (Riverdale, Douglaston, Brooklyn Heights). The overwhelming majority of working- and lower-middle-class New Yorkers reside in the neighborhoods, such as Elmhurst-Corona, which make up the rest of the city.[1]

The imagery of core versus outer boroughs easily lends itself to simplified notions of New York as a "dual city," a view harking back to the "marble palaces and dark dens" metaphors of nineteenth-century observers.[2] From this perspective the "cosmopolitan" and "urbane" values of the higher classes are extolled by scholars and policymakers, and the "local" and "parochial" life-styles of the lesser classes are disdained.[3] The sociologist Gerald Suttles castigates this "continuing tendency . . . to describe urban society as a stratum of [upper-] middle- and upper-class conventionality suspended over a layer of self-defeating and self-imposed irrationality." He urges that we break with this top-down viewpoint and calls on urban ethnographers "to reduce the distance between strata and make intelligible the conduct" of the working- and lower-middle-class urban majority.[4]

In doing so we need to bring both outer-borough and Manhattan-centered viewpoints into sharper focus. We embark on this analysis of New York City's social order somewhat unconventionally, however, beginning from the outside in.

Neighborhood New York

Neighborhood New York is where the city's working and lower-middle classes reside, and where its new immigrants settle. It contains many languages and many local and occupational codes. It is a city of small businesses, diverse houses of worship, well-used parks, schools that children walk to, civic and ethnic associations, little-noted public rituals, neighborhood hangouts, local memories and traditions, old-country and down-home survivals, foods of delicious variety, and ways of getting around formal rules, oversized bureaucracies, and labor market rigidities. There are differences to be sure among the Italians of Belmont, the African Americans of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Puerto Ricans of El Barrio, and the Chinese of Flushing.[5] Still, the routines and aspirations of neighborhood New Yorkers have more in common with one another than with the financial, business, and political elites of the city, or with its upper-middle-class professionals.

"Neighborhood" is an ambiguous word. It may refer to both the "street neighborhood" and the "district" levels of urban life. The first level connotes neighborly interaction and pleasantries, children's play groups, corner stores, people-watching, familiar strangers, and personal feelings about "my neighborhood" and its safety. The most immediate forms of neighborhood political organization—block, tenant, and merchant associations—arise at this street-neighborhood level.[6]

At the district level, New York neighborhoods are amalgams of named subareas (often the domains of organized civic groups), commercial strips, and public school, park, and hospital catchment areas. Many residents identify only vaguely with their district, and few know its political activists by name. District boundaries—usually expressways, railroad tracks, parks, or major streets—often have more physical than historic reality.[7] When Community District 4's boundaries were established in 1961, Corona was divided at Roosevelt Avenue between CD4 and CD3, and the southern portion of Elmhurst, cut off since the late 1950s by the Long Island Expressway, was assigned to CD5. Since then, however, it is these new boundaries that have set the parameters of district-level politics.

Inhabiting neighborhood New York's streets and districts are its pink- and white- and blue-collar income earners and their families. They include manual laborers, machine operators, clerical and sales personnel, government workers, schoolteachers, and supervisory and technical employees. Present also are lower-middle-class retail shopkeepers, owners of small manufacturing and repair firms, rank-and-file professionals, and local clergy.[8] And there are poor neighborhood New Yorkers as well, those who depend upon kin, friends, charity, or government for survival. They include persons who lose or cannot find jobs; others who lose household income through death, divorce, or desertion; still others who succumb to physical or mental illness or to addiction; elderly persons whose in-

comes drop after retirement; and dependent family members of all these persons.

Rather than separating the poor as an autonomous "underclass," it makes ethnographic sense to locate them within neighborhood New York. Even in neighborhoods such as Elmhurst-Corona, which their residents see as "middle class," poor persons are part of the local mix.[9] In 1984 I spoke about housing issues before an audience of three hundred white, mainly Italian members of St. Leo's Golden Age Club in Corona Heights. At the conclusion of my talk a handful of men and women approached me individually. All had incomes low enough to qualify for state and city property-tax or rent-increase exemption programs for senior citizens, and they wanted more information about them. Several described living situations that included adult children troubled by unemployment or divorce, and a few hinted at worse problems. Two elderly women lived in female-headed, three-generation households and played central roles in raising their grandchildren.[10]

The proportion of poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class residents varies from one New York neighborhood to another, and it shifts as the city's economy rises or falls. It also varies as neighborhoods change with the arrival of newcomers and with the upward and outward mobility of established residents and their children.

Both historically and in the present, when poorer newcomers—often immigrants—first move in, many willingly or unwillingly accept more crowded living conditions than established neighborhood residents are accustomed to. Landlords profit from this situation by providing quickly renovated or even new lower-quality accommodations. In addition, the younger demographic profile of newcomer populations leads to more intensive use of housing and also of public spaces, transportation, and city services. What frequently follows is diminished accessibility or even reduced provision of municipal amenities for children, the elderly, and the more economically secure established residents. Sometimes an increase in crime by a small proportion of newcomers and the use of criminally controlled services by others also occur. Predictably, some of those at the upper end of the established population begin to move to other neighborhoods or suburbs. In time, they are followed by successful newcomers and by members of the new, locally raised second generation.

Although neighborhood New York today is home to an increasingly diverse white, black, Latin American, and Asian population, it remains marked by substantial racial segregation. In 1990 twenty of the city's fifty-nine community districts were 63 percent or more white, eight were 60 percent or more black, and four were 65 percent or more Latin American; many other districts contained sub-areas where one racial category was numerically dominant.[11] In only nine community districts, including CD4, were the white, black, Latin American, and Asian categories each less than 50 percent of the total population. Only in

Elmhurst-Corona's neighbor, Community District 3, however, did the relative numerical balance among the four racial categories approach the situation in CD4. Although neither of these two districts mirrored perfectly the racial demography of New York City, they came closer to the citywide picture than did any of the fifty-seven others.[12]

The Permanent Government

When turning to the opposite end of the social order, it does little good to speak generically of "the upper class" or "the rich." There certainly are upper-class and rich persons in New York City, but linkages among them are loose. Some are members of the white Protestant upper class whose Social Register connections and integrating institutions are well studied. This group includes both old New York families and arrivals from elsewhere in the United States who come to join prestigious firms or manage and direct corporations based in the city. A Jewish upper class with its own traditions and institutions is also well established.[13] Among the city's wealthy residents there are in addition foreigners whose investments and business interests bring them from Europe, Canada, Japan, and other countries. And there are the newly rich, persons with little social entrée to established upper-class gatherings, particularly when their wealth arises outside corporate business channels. Individuals from all these groups may live in the same areas of Manhattan and frequent the same expensive restaurants, stores, and galleries, but they organize their lives in separate networks.

Within these higher circles, however, and maintaining connections as needed to all of them, is a much smaller group which in 1977 journalists Jack Newfield and Paul DuBrul christened "the permanent government." In a general sense its members' activities ensure perpetuity of upper-class wealth and power and a city that radiates a wholesome corporate "business climate." But in a particular sense they serve a narrower interest: the molding of public policy for the private gain of permanent-government figures themselves.

> Ultimate power over public policy in New York is invisible and unelected. It is exercised by a loose confederation of bankers, bond underwriters, members of public authorities, the big insurance companies, political fund-raisers, publishers, law firms, builders, judges, backroom politicians, and some union leaders. The power of this interlocking network of elites is based on the control of institutions, money, property, and the law-making process. It endures no matter who the voters elect as mayor, governor, or president. Its collective power, when organized, is greater than the elected, representative government. . . . [T]here are about 1500 to 2000 people in New York City who have pieces of a power that is decisive, concealed, and therefore unaccountable. . . . These 1500 to

2000 people all know each other and deal with each other as members of the same club.[14]

The permanent government's base is "the Golden Triangle of politics–real estate–banking" and not, as in other cities, the control of natural resources or major manufacturing firms.[15] Much New York City political history can be read as the jockeying for ascendancy of politicians, landowners and developers, and financiers and as competition and alliances among them. What ties them together is a common interest in Manhattan real estate and in profits generated by maintaining and increasing its value.

Economist Robert Fitch argues that land in the downtown-midtown Manhattan core, not merely the buildings on it, acquires value as the entire regional economy grows. As the paper value of this centrally located property increases, it in turn absorbs more and more capital through higher and higher rents. This benefits those who own this prime real estate, but it deflects capital investment from other, productive uses. As core Manhattan land costs rise, the process inexorably shifts investment to land uses that provide the highest return: commercial office buildings, upscale retail business, and "luxury" housing for the upper and upper middle classes.

Throughout the city's history the expansion of these highest-return uses in Manhattan's core has squeezed outward such other uses as manufacturing, shipping, warehousing, mass-market shopping, and housing for neighborhood New Yorkers. Openly or behind the scenes, members of the permanent government direct public policy to support and speed up this process. As a result, public expenditures are championed that make Manhattan office buildings and luxury housing more feasible and more profitable—mass transportation connections, tax exemptions, park and landfill creation, subsidies for "high culture" institutions, and removal (rather than in-place upgrading) of "slum" housing and "unsightly" manufacturing. This process sends ripples and waves across neighborhood New York, spinning working- and lower-middle-class jobs farther outward, relocating masses of ordinary people, transforming the nature of existing neighborhoods (if not eliminating them), and providing only minimal transportation and quality-of-life services to the outer boroughs.[16]

The returns to the permanent government come in the form of rents, bank investments and loans, and myriad other upper- and upper-middle-class rewards generated by new office towers and luxury housing in Manhattan. Moreover, as Newfield and DuBrul point out,

> an amazing number of individuals can become involved in any building project in New York City: the seller of the site, the builder of the project, architects, dozens of separate construction trades, title-search insurance brokers, contractors, property insurance brokers, truckers, building inspectors, bankers (to finance the sale of the land, the cost of construction and ultimately a long-term mortgage)—and almost all of them will be accompanied by legions of lawyers, accountants, and tax experts. . . . In turn each of these groups has its own lobbyists, string-pullers, and political godfathers operating at City Hall and the State Capitol, and each is a source of campaign contributions, favors and political foot-soldiers for "sympathetic" politicians.[17]

The public expenditure and borrowing that support all this compete with municipal services and "welfare" payments benefiting neighborhood New York.[18] In boom periods the fulfillment of these latter needs may be uncontroversial, but when economic downturns occur, the permanent government demands cuts and retrenchment so that public subsidy for its favored projects can go forward.

During both boom and bust some permanent government interests hammer unceasingly at "high taxes" in order to retain even greater amounts of private capital. In this they are joined by those segments of the city's upper class whose interests do not lie directly in Manhattan land and its profits but who have little desire to devote any of their wealth to taxes. Others within the permanent government are less upset about prevailing tax rates. They are more concerned to ensure that city government expenditures are channeled to desired uses: interest to bondholders, capital budget infrastructure investment, office building and luxury housing subsidies and tax exemptions, and business services and promotion campaigns. Still others support planned social spending, cautioning that excessive zeal either to limit tax revenues or to spend them too conservatively could result in political unrest in neighborhood New York. These efforts are assisted by upper-middle-class "good government" spokespersons and charity-minded "experts" on the poor.

Elected officials and political party leaders receive campaign contributions, investment tips, financial kickbacks, patronage positions, and postretirement jobs from private-sector permanent-government associates. Periodically, however, they seek to enlarge their own cut of the tax-generated pie, thus limiting the flow of public expenditures for the enhancement of land values. The cry of "scandal!" is then raised by "reform" leaders and the press, most recently during the "City for Sale" decade of the 1980s.[19]

Robert Fitch views this disruption *within* the permanent government as a contest between political party "kleptocrats" and real estate developer and financial investor "plutocrats": "The goal of the kleptocrats is to sell (discreetly, of course) franchises, contracts and gentrification rights to the plutocrats for as high a price as possible until retirement or incarceration, whichever comes first. To stay in the contest, however, the kleptocrats must maintain their power base in the outer boroughs and be at least somewhat responsive to neighborhood concerns on some occasions." Fitch points out that the "plutocrats" prefer a weak city council with budgetary decision-making centralized in a small group of leaders or, ideally, a like-minded or malleable mayor. Periodic municipal charter re-

form accomplishes precisely this outcome and serves to curb the "kleptocratic" cut into the molding of public policy for private gain.[20]

Roots of Political Change in Neighborhood New York

As the Manhattan core of offices and luxury housing expands not only vertically but laterally, the land-value politics governing this process result in continuous pressure on neighborhood New York. Existing structures and neighborhoods are either "upgraded" as investment capital for new construction and renovation flows in, or "downgraded" by "disinvestment" in repairs and maintenance and an intensification of housing stock usage (that is, more crowding).[21] In consequence, neighborhoods "change": either upper and upper middle classes begin to appear or immigrants, lower-paid workers, and poor persons start moving in. When New Yorkers speak of "healthy" and "deteriorating" neighborhoods, these are the changes they are talking about, whether or not they understand the impetus provided by permanent-government policies.

There is nothing "natural" or "ecological" about these processes, despite generations of urbanologists who have used such metaphors to describe them. Neighborhood change is the result of deliberate action by persons and networks within the urban social order that seek to maintain or increase the value of their investments in land. To understand politics in neighborhood New York, one must ask, how do its residents organize to maintain their own interests?

The early signs of upgrading or downgrading are quickly recognized by established residents. More often than attributing such changes to government policies, bank lending decisions, or real estate profit-seeking, however, neighborhood New Yorkers allocate responsibility to the various newcomers themselves. For downgrading, they blame poorer new arrivals whose accommodation in more crowded, or less well maintained, rental housing they sense correctly will "change" their neighborhood. They also blame the newcomers for the lower prices that real estate speculators now offer for privately owned homes, and they nervously try to decide whether and when to sell, hoping to leave before a stampede begins. When upgrading occurs, some residents at first welcome the early wave of developers, selling their own homes at a profit or hoping that the new arrivals will "clean up" the neighborhood—which often does occur as increased municipal services follow. Renters, however, soon discover that the pace of upgrading is pricing them out, and homeowners who resist offers to buy are burdened by higher property taxes as the neighborhood around them "improves."

Both sorts of pressure have affected Elmhurst-Corona since the 1960s—contradictorially, perhaps, but in tune with ups and downs in the regional economy and permanent-government policies. Though not always clearly or correctly, change has been seen by established residents as coming from both below and above, and thus threatening continuity. The local political responses to these

changes, their wider context, and their implications for ethnic and racial relations are the central themes of this book.

The Social Order of New York City

A summary view of the city's social order appears in Figure 5. The upper and upper middle classes reside in the Manhattan core and a few outer-borough enclaves. (Some also own additional homes outside New York City.) The majority of these two classes are U.S.-born white Americans, but a segment of global elites from other countries now also live in Manhattan. The upper middle class includes some U.S.-born and immigrant Asian, Latin American, and black members. These groups, however, confront "glass ceilings" that limit promotion and influence in the professional and managerial careers they enter. Opportunities for upper-middle-class advancement, particularly in the corporate sector, are still open overwhelmingly to whites, including many who come to New York City as adults from elsewhere in the United States.[22]

The lower middle and working classes and the poor reside in neighborhood New York. The particular mix of these categories varies from inner-city areas, where rising land values may eventually displace them, to "stable" areas in the outer boroughs. Immigrants and U.S.-born persons of all races and ethnic backgrounds live in these neighborhoods, but to a substantial degree they are divided residentially by race.

At the upper edge of the lower middle class, movement out of neighborhood New York to the suburbs is a highly desired and continual process. Mobility of neighborhood New Yorkers into the city's upper middle class through education and professional training often involves suburban exit and later reentry.[23] (Many upwardly mobile suburbanites also move to other parts of the United States.) Private schools to reproduce upper- and upper-middle-class status for their own offspring are supported by Manhattan-core dwellers. A few children from neighborhood New York do achieve mobility to the upper middle class locally, through scholarships or exceptional effort.

Six distinctive forms of politics occur at particular points in the social order of New York City:

1. The politics of the upper class involves strategies to maximize wealth accumulation, either through limiting taxes or through molding public policy for private gain. Particular upper-class segments are also dedicated either to retrenchment in public social spending or to maintaining political stability through targeted spending on social needs.

2. Most upper-middle-class professionals maintain their lubricatory power base by supporting upper-class policies, but one section of this class consists of "reformers" or "liberals" who advance the cause of "good government" against kleptocratic politicians; they also provide "expertise" for public and private

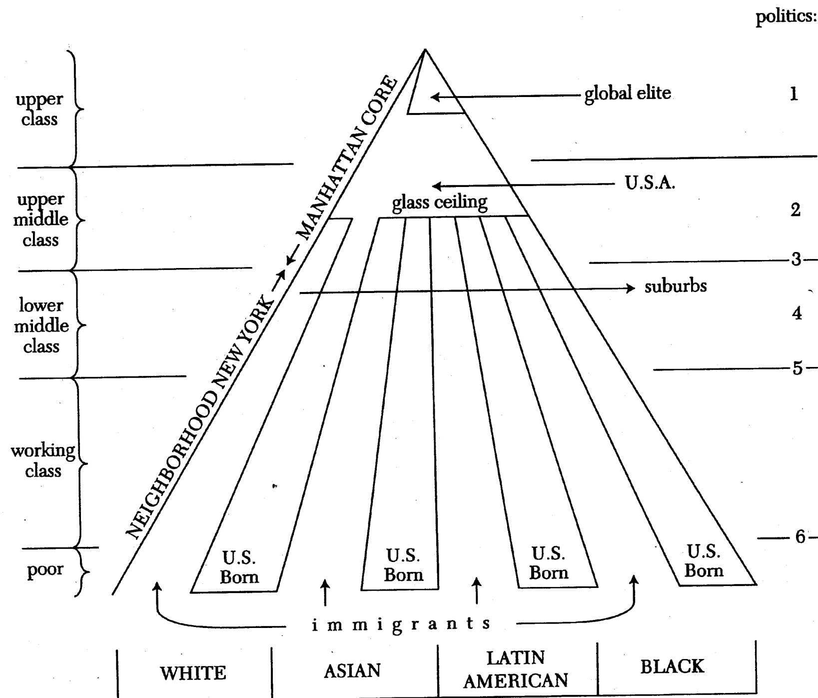

Figure 6. The social order of New York City.

spending on social needs. A few upper-middle-class professionals, however, become "advocates": class renegades who utilize lubricatory power to expand the flow of resources to neighborhood New York.[24]

3. Elected and party officials are themselves part of the upper middle or upper class via the emoluments of office if not by education and social origin. Their prime objective is political predictability and reelection. Although they reward faithful voters, according to John Mollenkopf, "neither the regular nor the reform faction of the Democratic party" in New York City is "interested in mobilizing potentially challenging groups" and thus expanding the electorate and its demands.[25] A few maverick politicians without organized party support, however, occasionally create independent electoral followings in neighborhood New York and manage to survive.

4. The strategies of upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class New Yorkers are highly personal, oriented to college education for their children and, for many, a move to suburban housing when they can afford it. Because they are, in Oliver Cox's definition, "members of a class [who] are constantly striving away from their fellows, a situation which leads to their individuation," their interest in local politics is curtailed by their desired exit from the city.[26]

5. Politics in lower-middle- and working-class neighborhoods is oriented to quality-of-life issues arising from permanent-government polices and neighborhood upgrading or downgrading. Civic associations and local leaders use the power of numbers to press for improvements when municipal services are overused or declining; they also work to supplement services through their own efforts. Elected officials are one potential resource in these struggles but not the only one. Neighborhood surveillance and volunteerism by local leaders seeks to accomplish what politicians and "liberals" cannot be counted on to achieve.

6. The politics of New York neighborhoods that house mainly poor and lower-paid working-class residents is characterized by demands for social and health services, which have never been adequate. In African American neighborhoods these demands may be expressed through a rhetoric of "empowerment," which calls attention to race and historic political neglect; this contrasts with quality-of-life politics, which underplays race and ethnicity.[27]