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Gentrification and Its Discontents

Manhattan never was what we think it was.

By Benjamin Schwarz

IMAGE CREDIT:

MICHAEL SORKIN, AN architect and critic, and Sharon Zukin, an urban sociologist, have each written what they describe as books about contemporary New York City—but that’s putting things far too broadly. Zukin’s *Naked City* does make forays into the white-hot center of hipness, Brooklyn’s Williamsburg, and to rapidly gentrifying Harlem. But the bulk of her book, and all of Sorkin’s *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, is confined to fine-grained observations of the streets and neighborhoods within roughly 20 blocks of their apartments in Greenwich Village—that is, west to the Village’s Meatpacking District and new Gold Coast along West Street, east to the fringes of Alphabet City, north to Union Square, and south to SoHo and Tribeca. This area today is in every sense rarefied, and for most of its history was in crucial ways set apart from the rest of Manhattan, which to some extent leaped beyond it. Still, the precedent for using the Village to draw lessons and issue prescriptions about New York generally, and indeed urban life writ large, was of course sanctified in 1961 by that doughty urban observer and community activist, Jane Jacobs. She largely formed her conclusions in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—the ur-text for contemporary writing about urban life and the most influential American book ever written about cities—by closely reading the neighborhood life around her house on Hudson Street (about six blocks from Sorkin’s apartment and, by my reckoning, about 10 from Zukin’s; it’s all a bit clubby).

Both authors are consciously, unavoidably “in dialogue” with Jacobs, as Sorkin puts it, so it’s probably not surprising that the two broadly agree on what ails New York and how it should be remedied. The city, Zukin laments, has “lost its soul.” What Sorkin calls the “pathology” of gentrification is obliterating those elements of thriving urban life that Jacobs famously identified: diversity of uses; the mom-and-pop stores; what Zukin calls the “cheek-by-jowl checkerboard” of rich, poor, and middle class; the distinctive identity of neighborhoods. Formerly funky precincts are upscaled, redeveloped, and—you guessed it—“Disneyfied.” In the Village, Sorkin declares, “local businesses and longtime residents are being forced out by rising prices and yuppies.” In SoHo, the sidewalks have long been packed on weekends with people who “with no thought of art” (my emphasis) have “come simply to shop and brunch and to look at each other shopping and brunching.” (I should add that although their screeds and prescriptions are banal and predictable, Sorkin’s and Zukin’s minute, street-level observations and their analyses of the social forces underlying gentrification are astute and precise.)

Inevitably, behind cries of decline is a conception, conscious or not, of a time and situation that was better—when the city had a soul. In her invocations of laundries and shoe-repair and hardware stores, Zukin betrays a vague nostalgia, shared by many chronicles of New York (Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker*, Ric Burns’s documentary *New York*, Pete Hamill’s *memoirs*), for the Old Neighborhoods characteristic of what was once an overwhelmingly working-class city. As late as 1950, New York was by far the world’s largest industrial center, and even Manhattan was predominantly and the Village largely a center for labor. There were sewing rooms and small-scale manufacturing lofts in the east-central Village, SoHo, and Tribeca (where, in the late 1970s, I worked in a belt-and-handbag factory); the far West Village had a working waterfront (New York’s port was easily the world’s largest, employing 200,000 people) and a brewery (New York made one-fifth of the world’s beer). Even if Zukin and Sorkin bemoan the city’s deindustrialization and are wistful for the higgledy-piggledy way manufacturing was scattered throughout New York (diversity! mixed use!), they’re compelled to make clear that they don’t miss the sweatshops and
the exploitative, horrible life that went with them. And recall that the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, in the
heart of the Village on a block fronting Washington Square, burned in the second decade of the 20th
century—only 25 years before Mary McCarthy, 35 years before the Abstract Expressionists and the Beats,
and 45 years before NYU student Woody Allen would all be strolling the square. Which means that even
hazy melancholy for the New York of regular Joes with lunch pails returning after a good day’s work to
their neighborhoods of kids playing stickball and corner drugstores dispensing egg creams can only evoke
scenes pretty much limited to the years of the LaGuardia administration.

While Sorkin, Zukin, and seemingly everyone else misses the relics of that lost city, such as its dense
network of mostly mediocre neighborhood bakeries—relics that, thanks to the uneven and arrested
economic development imposed by the Depression, war, postwar decline, and fiscal crisis, were a familiar
aspect of the streetscape of much of Manhattan into the 1980s—the city of the old neighborhoods was
really an agglomeration of mostly self-sufficient, inward-looking, lower-middle-class communities. (Even
as young marrieds, my French-Canadian grandmother and Korean grandfather, neither of whom ever
mastered English, largely confined themselves to the few blocks of their upper Manhattan neighborhood.)
To many modern celebrants of urban life, the Manhattan of the 1940s seems, as Zukin acknowledges, a far
less “interesting” place—a less hip, thrumming, and worldly place—than the contemporary borough. While
some poor and rich communities were in shocking proximity—the slaughterhouses and shanties of Turtle
Bay, until they were cleared for the construction of the UN headquarters, essentially abutted the grand
residences of Beekman Place—there wasn’t much of the kind of lively intermingling of classes or even
ethnicities that Zukin’s description might evoke.

When you come right down to it, the image of vibrant, diverse, but neighborly city life—Zukin speaks of
the continued struggle between the homogenized “corporate city” (bad) and the “urban village” (good)—
that champions of urbanism summon is really the ideal of the West Village neighborhood life that Jacobs
imperishably described. Here were the laundry, the deli, the tailor shop, the candy and cigar stores, the
greengrocer, the pizzeria, the hardware store, the locksmith, the corner drugstore, and the dry cleaner—all
of which, with their comradely-but-not-officious proprietors, helped sustain the intimacies of long
neighborhood association. Here was a rooted population of Italian, Spanish, and Irish working-class
families, many of whose menfolk worked at the piers a few blocks to the west (my mother, who lived in the
neighborhood—on Charles Street, just east of Hudson—from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, always
recalled the exotic glamour that the waterfront bestowed on it). Here were cobblestone streets and early-
19th-century houses, such as the one Jacobs’s family was restoring, all of which testified to the continuity
and stability—the fly-in-amber quality—of an enclave that, thanks to a series of historical accidents (and
the nativist sentiments of its 19th-century inhabitants), was removed from the ravenous economic
dynamism of a city that had bypassed it. Jacobs summoned, as Zukin trenchantly puts it, “an idyllic picture
of small town life in the midst of the big city.” But added to the workaday if charming neighborhood were
worldly bohemian embellishments: an antique store, a shabby-genteel French restaurant that Ezra Pound
had patronized, and the White Horse Tavern, open very late, which had been a favorite of Anaïs Nin, James
Baldwin, Dylan Thomas, and countless longshoremen. And here were the urbane newcomers—journalists,
architects, artists—who, like Jacobs and her husband, eschewed the central part of the Village, around
MacDougal Street, that the tourists were blighting. Here, then, was a vivacious, neighborly, historic district
inhabited by Old World workers and well-educated sophisticates.

Thanks to the profound influence that The Death and Life of Great American Cities has exerted, the West
Village circa 1960 has come to epitomize—really to be the blueprint for—the urban good life. But in its
mix of the new and the left over, in its alchemy of authenticity, grit, seedy glamour, and intellectual and
cultural sophistication, this was a neighborhood in a transitional and unsustainable, if golden, moment.
Which meant that it was about to lose its soul. Two recently published books, Wrestling with Moses, by
Anthony Flint, and Manhattan Projects, by Samuel Zipp, detail how the working class was driven out of the
West Village, as gentrifiers like Jacobs drove up assessed values and rents. Progressive, reformist city
planners, supported by seemingly most of the Village’s blue-collar residents, favored a relatively low-
impact urban-renewal scheme to build hundreds of below-market-rate homes in the neighborhood—a plan
Jacobs and a group of largely affluent residents successfully fought on the grounds that it would destroy the
area’s character. Whatever the merits of the opposing positions, one of the proponents of renewal was
Surely this is taking the fetishization of vibrant Jacobsian urbanity too far. It’s entirely reasonable—in fact, humane—to argue that the state must ensure decent living conditions for its citizens (and God knows we are terribly far from that situation). But it’s a wholly different proposition to argue that, in the name of what Sorkin calls “the protection of … the local” and to forestall “a landscape of homogeneity,” the state should create the conditions necessary for favored groups—be they designers, craftspeople, small-batch distillers, researchers, the proprietors of mom-and-pop stores—to live in expensive and fashionable neighborhoods or boroughs. That effort would ultimately be an aesthetic endeavor to ensure that the affluent, well-educated denizens of said neighborhoods be provided with the stage props and scenery necessary for what Jacobs and her heirs define as an enriching urban experience.

Mostly, though, such political solutions seem quaint: all this bellyaching about authenticity and lost soul. Sorkin and Zukin, sentimental progressives, need a bracing dose of Marx. Manhattan is the primary locus of self-expression (Zukin is perceptive on this point) and from—relatedly, ultimately—the acceleration of the global economy.
of global capitalism, the most voracious force for change in history. Best to pick a different place to try to render fixed and solid that which inexorably melts into air.

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Gentrification has been great business for property people and lately for academics, mainly in the social sciences. It isn’t by any means a new topic. The term was coined in 1964 by Ruth Glass, a German-born British sociologist, to describe changes she observed in the London of that time. Sharon Zukin’s groundbreaking study of gentrification in lower Manhattan, _Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change_ (1982), is based on work done in the 1970s. His most recent book is _Why Cities Look the Way They Do_ (2019). Newcomers: _Gentrification and Its Discontents_ By Matthew L. Schuerman University of Chicago Press, 320pp, £23.00 ISBN 9780226476261 Published 6 December 2019. Read more.