

CANARSIE

*The Jews
and Italians of
Brooklyn against
Liberalism*

Jonathan Rieder

"A remarkably compelling portrait of the ways of middle America, drawn with compassion, grace, and wisdom."

—Kai Erikson

Canarsie



**The Jews
and Italians
of Brooklyn
against Liberalism**

JONATHAN RIEDER

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and London, England

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For Catherine

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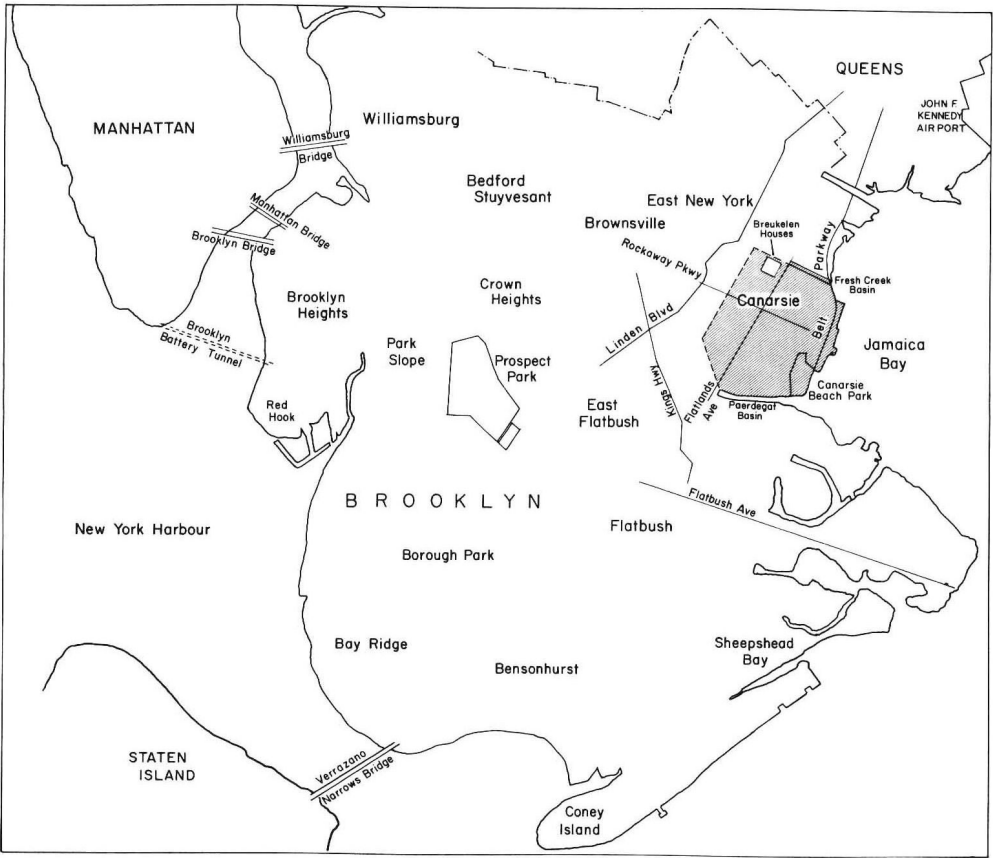
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Canarsie



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introduction

Danger and Dispossession

Perched along Jamaica Bay on filled marshland in a corner of southeast Brooklyn, Canarsie is a houseproud neighborhood of about 70,000 people, mainly middle-income Jews and Italians. A haven in a seamy metropolis, the community exudes an air of shabby but respectable domesticity. Two-family brick row houses line the compulsive grid of streets or, in the older Italian section, squeeze into the vacant spaces next to bungalows built earlier in the century. The residents see themselves as the plain, doughty backbone of America — cabbies and teachers, merchants and craftsmen, salesmen and police — who stoically bear their burdens, raise their families, and serve the country.

They are mostly children and grandchildren of immigrants, and some are immigrants themselves. They have come a long way from the shtetls of eastern Europe and the sultry towns of Sicily and southern Italy. But they have not traveled so far that they don't nervously glance back, just a mile or two, to the grimy ghettos of Brownsville and East New York where many of them spent their youth, ghettos that have since become hopeless reservations of the black and Hispanic poor. Like many other Americans who have struggled to attain a modestly blessed position in life, the people of Canarsie feel that America has been good to them. Yet between 1960 and 1980 it was becoming increasingly hard to sustain that faith, as ominously, inexplicably, things began to go awry. Canarsians experienced those years as a time of danger and dispossession — culturally and internationally, but especially racially. A mood of outrage and betrayal succeeded self-congratulatory optimism. Out of that discontent arose new political and cultural temptations and dangers.

That period of frantic change forced Canarsians to explain misfortune, to resolve conflicts, and to protect their interests. They had to

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summon all of their moral and political strength to assimilate or fend off the new realities. The sweeping away of brittle defenses permitted a glimpse into the deep structures of belief, of action, and of sentiment, which are hidden by everyday routine. What is it precisely that I was privileged to witness, beyond the vaporous generalities of change? The answer is: the travails of liberalism. This book will not delve into the structural causes of those trials, which would require another sort of analysis, but will examine the crisis as it was lived by ordinary people in Brooklyn.

In the fall of 1972, after an integration-minded school board ordered Canarsie to take into its schools a few dozen black children from Brownsville, the residents moved quickly to secure the borders and repulse the strangers. A white boycott of the schools kept ten thousand children from their lessons for a week. A few housewives, liberated for the moment from the bonds of domesticity, lobbed rocks at school buses. Marchers raised banners that read, "Canarsie Schools for Canarsie Children."

Pointing to the unsavory acts of a few protesters, some pundit coined the epithet "Canarsieism," staining the community with the memory of a brawling avenger, Senator Joe McCarthy. In its editorials the *New York Times* concluded, "The shameful situation in Canarsie illustrates the forces of unreason sweeping over the city and nation," and hoped that "the arrival of new [black] pupils can be turned into a friendly occasion rather than a shameful blocking of the schoolhouse door à la Little Rock."¹ Presumably, the associations came quickly to *Times* readers: Canarsie, backlash country, racist thuggery.

At a meeting to sustain the tempo of the boycott, one of Canarsie's few black residents shuddered. " 'My God,' I thought, 'This is madness! What can be wrong with my neighbors?' " His face was grim as he remembered. "It was neighbor against neighbor. I sat there in that meeting with five other blacks, we were the only ones there, and it was frightening. All that cheering and jeering: we could have been in Columbia, South Carolina, or Selma, Alabama!" Sickened by the spectacle of whites hurling spittle and invective at black schoolchildren, Wilfred Cartey, a black poet, turned to verse: "They rend the silence / the silent majority / screeching white-powdered / hatred / on the backs of little / black children."²

In the crowd in front of Wilson Junior High, two women fumed. "Our families voted liberal all their life and look where it got us," one of them said. She turned to her friend, pointing a finger. "You know,

you're Jewish and I'm Jewish and you know as well as I know that the only place to buy a home in this city is in an Italian neighborhood, because the Italians have more guts than the Jews."³ What did this commotion hold for the future of liberalism? Some of the insurgents parading in the streets were the people and the children of the people who were the New Deal's source of élan, provided its ballast, and gave it their votes. Without the loyalty of people like these, the old liberalism must surely collapse.

Scholars have probed the fury that erupted in the 1960s and 1970s in lower-middle-class communities. And like the label "Canarsieism," their formulations have helped to replace the sloppiness of reality with a misleading metaphoric neatness. To make sense of middle-class discontent, writers have invoked white racism, "embourgeoisement," labor market rivalry, apple-pie authoritarianism, Lockean individualism, neopopulist retaliation, right-wing protectionism, postindustrial society, and political ethnicity.⁴ If each of these concepts explains a piece of the puzzle, the danger is that the pattern of the whole may vanish.

Middle America was not a hard geographic place delimited by a political jurisdiction. Nor was it a *cri de coeur* of a middle class nervous about its fading privileges. It was more than a vague spot on the social pyramid or a flight by Luddites into a clarifying past or a fixation on the virtues of bootstrapping. Middle America was not even just the backward-turning movement of a vengeful hinterland. The middle classes had many complaints, their discontent had many sources. No single factor accounts for it.

Economic need and psychic strain inclined the middle classes toward a certain fractiousness, but these alone did not prod them to action. Middle America arose from a conjunction of internal wants and historical events that bedeviled them: the civil rights revolution, the problems of the cities, black power, the war in Vietnam, the disaffection of the young, stagflation, the revolution in morals. All these played havoc with the normal routines of politics, cleaving the country in two and fragmenting the Democratic Party. As the British journalist Godfrey Hodgson described it, "The schism went deeper than mere political disagreement. It was as if, from 1967 on, for several years, two different tribes of Americans experienced the same outward events but experienced them as two quite different realities."⁵

Middle America felt molested by formidable powers: blacks and liberals and bureaucrats. Reaction to these forces gave middle-class

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politics its distinctive imagery of danger and dispossession. The middle classes never lost this wish to preserve, although the various factions never agreed precisely on what was to be saved or how the task was to be accomplished. Though convinced of their righteousness, they felt helpless to enforce their authority, at least for a time. In the early 1960s the intelligentsia had claimed alienation as their private affliction; by the end of the decade the white middle classes had also succumbed to that malaise. They went on to withdraw their pledges of trust from a liberal state depleted of credibility. Unwilling to give the government a blank check, the middle classes delivered their votes on a straight quid pro quo basis: stop the change.

Middle America felt itself a victim, the object of others' will. Later it took the initiative, becoming a preacher, often a punisher. The resentment of the white middle classes gave conservatives a chance to ply the politics of revenge. Liberals became the targets of demagogues who incited audiences with righteous appeals to silent, forgotten average Americans. To the men in Nixon's White House, wrote Jonathan Schell, "The time seemed ripe for an 'offensive' against the opposition which would outdo in uncontrolled vehemence and intensity anything they had attempted so far. Attorney General [John] Mitchell said to a reporter, 'This country is going so far right you are not even going to recognize it.' They believed that, as one White House aide put it, they 'had the liberal Establishment in total rout.'"⁶ The parties of order tried to reclaim an America purged of the frenzies of a decade.

There were many Middle Americas. In the Deep South reaction was tinged with the mania of good old boys and more than a residue of Jim Crow. Marshall Frady observed of his native South, "Life is simply more glandular than it is in the rest of the nation. Southerners tend to belong and believe through blood and weather and common earth and common enemy and common travail, rather than belonging, believing, cerebrally. The tribal instinct is what they answer to." Some observers saw in the discontent of the sunbelt the fast-draw nationalism and contempt for eastern money changers that Vachel Lindsay had caricatured in his satire of William Jennings Bryan, that "prairie avenger, mountain lion . . . smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders from the West."⁷ In Canarsie, middle-class upset was entangled in the quest of Brooklyn immigrants for respectability, in the mysteries of Italian-American provincialism, in the ambivalent emotions of Jewish liberalism.

As either the demon of the left or the hope of right-wing vision-

aries, Middle America remained a false union. Nixon's southern strategy hastened the breakup of a liberal majority already buckling under the pressure of internal contradictions, yet it failed to join sagebrush rebels, Old South diehards, and Catholic workers in perfect communion. Middle America was a mixture of discrete forces, with points of tension as well as of affinity. Conflicts between plebeians and patricians, regions of economic growth and of decline, Protestants and Catholics, made it difficult to develop a collegial spirit. Discontent gave conservatives an opening, but the old majority first had to fail or abdicate for the new one to coalesce. Savvy leaders would have to devise persuasive policy and compelling rhetoric to convert discontent into something that was more than fleeting protest or passing fancy.

The making of Middle America in a remote corner of Brooklyn tells a great deal about the fate of contemporary reform. At first glance, the thinking of the people of Canarsie appears to have changed a good deal in a generation. The hard luck of Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1980 hints at the seismic changes that have altered Brooklyn politics over the past half century. Between 1920 and 1932 Canarsians moved from a mixture of Democratic, Republican, and Socialist sympathies into the Democratic camp. Italian Republicans and Jewish Socialists virtually slid off the pages of the 1932 Kings County enrollment books, swelling Democratic registration tallies and piling up support for Franklin Roosevelt. Forty-eight years later a sunbelt Protestant Republican corralled a majority of Jewish and Italian votes in Canarsie. That Ronald Reagan swept the Italian lunchpail precincts is not entirely surprising, nor that he earned accolades from recent émigré Russian Jews with little fondness for détente. But Reagan also ran well in precincts full of Jewish teachers, the kind of people who had chosen Adlai Stevenson, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson by margins of eight to one.

An Italian man, whose father had followed with relish the *Brooklyn Tablet's* approving coverage of Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts, said in 1977 that he was more conservative than he used to be. But the daughter of socialist garment workers who read the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a paper whose masthead urged the workers of the world to unite, volunteered that she too felt less liberal than previously, although her fleeting grimace betrayed a trace of ambivalence. At times equivocally, but almost unanimously, the residents described themselves as "more conservative." The significance of these shifts in self-labeling is not immediately evident. The import

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and nuances of such changes do not lie scattered about on the surface of things, transparently accessible to all. Labels may reflect primal impulses; they are freighted with complex and ambivalent associations that remain opaque to strangers. Or they may be the prosaic stuff of habit, absorbed with little heed from the background noise of society's pedestrian conversations.

An even more pressing problem of understanding lies in the many meanings of the word *liberalism*: a doctrine of political rights, the free market economy of classical individualism, moderation of the excesses of the business cycle, to name just a few. Canarsians, however, did not have such rarified ideas in mind when they complained about liberalism. For them the word had a variety of earthier meanings that did not always cohere logically. Since 1960 the Jews and Italians of Canarsie have embellished and modified the meaning of liberalism, associating it with profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness. The term *conservative* acquired connotations of pragmatism, character, reciprocity, truthfulness, stoicism, manliness, realism, hardness, vengeance, strictness, and responsibility. This book explores the process by which that change in meaning was accomplished.

In order to chart the political odyssey of Canarsians, I adopted the stance of the ethnographer, trying to dwell long enough in a single place to find the larger truth in all its subtlety. Because I wanted to understand how the crisis of liberalism impinged on people's intimate life, I relied on intensive personal interviews. Almost all the events described in this book I observed at first hand between 1975 and 1977, and for eighteen of those twenty-four months—from January 1976 to July 1977—I lived in Brooklyn a few miles from Canarsie. I spent most of my waking hours there developing confidants, endlessly talking, and taking part in the life of political and civic groups. Over the next two years I returned to the community intermittently for brief stays and then again in 1980 for a two-week visit, the midpoint of which was the presidential election. The reader should keep in mind that most of the interviews took place in 1976 and 1977, years when the issues of black nationalism, the Vietnam war, and Watergate were alive in Canarsians' consciousness, although declining in relevance.

The time I spent in deep conversation gave Canarsians the chance to test me and, eventually, to vouch for me. Early in my stay, in a community nervous about racial encroachment, I asked a fumbling

question about busing. Less than an hour later, when I entered the headquarters of the Jefferson Democratic Club, a political leader barked at me, "Hey, what do you think you're doing, spreading rumors about blacks coming into the schools?" I explained that I had simply asked a woman a question about the desirability of integration. The leader retorted in a self-parody of Brooklynese, "I know, I told her you're okay. But remember, you're a Yankee in a small southern town and the folks are *noivous*."

All but a few of the quotations here were said to me by Canarsians and recorded on tape or, when they preferred, in writing at the time. I have removed all the names, I have changed a few details that might otherwise permit attribution, and in some places I have resorted to an inelegant but anonymous vagueness: "As one civic leader said," "A Jewish activist thought," "An Italian traditionalist felt." I have made these modest alterations to abide by the ethical imperatives of confidentiality, but especially to respect the privacy that Canarsians relinquished when they took me into their world.

I could not have written this kind of book without the cooperation of the people of Canarsie. The success of this brand of sociology is always an act of collusion, unwitting or designed, between the interviewer and subjects who refuse to act the part of witless puppets. Canarsians were a candid and courageous lot. Some saw the chance to indulge in puffery, but for the most part they braved the risks that come into play when individuals reveal themselves to a stranger. Canarsians gave me a precious part of themselves. I regret that I could not repay all the friendship, time, argument, trust, Kosher deli, sarcasm, coffee, kvetching, Italian pastry, and shots of whiskey they shared with me.

During my stay in Brooklyn, the initial suspicion of a stranger lingered for months, then yielded in a ritual induction. I had traveled with a band of right-wing activists across Brooklyn to a convocation of white backlash groups. My companions included some boosters of George Wallace and Spiro Agnew who suspected that my politics might not be theirs. One woman said to me as we stood in the vast cavern of an Italian catering hall, "You know, Jon, you've become like our adopted son. But remember, when it comes time for you to write this up, make sure you don't stick it to us."

Something characteristically Italian clung to her plainspoken words: unpretentious warmth, evoking a world divided neatly between loyal kin and perfidious strangers, with an implicit threat of swift reprisal for betrayal. I took her warning to heart as a principle

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of fidelity but also as a popular version of enlightenment: stay close to the truth. Democratic boss Meade Esposito seconded her thoughts in his inimitable way. "Hey Yale kid, you know who writes books? Liars and squealers. Throw the books out the window, get out on the streets and learn something!" I did not try to stick it to anyone, I did get out on the streets a bit, but I *have* written a book.

Some people in Brooklyn may be pained by some of what I have written. Still, I have tried to tell the truth about Canarsians, in their vicious moments as well as their moments of grace. There were plenty of both. The request most often made of me was fairness, which I have honored by showing the humor of the residents along with the vengefulness, the generosity as well as the racism. The last thing most Canarsians would respect is an academic gone native, sentimentalizing their nasty side and getting trapped in a folk romance. These folks are not romantic. Naturalism, not romanticism, is the appropriate aesthetic for capturing the culture of Brooklyn white ethnicity. The odd mixed truth of the American middle-income classes lies somewhere between the caricature of rabid hard-hats and the false populist worship of "real" Americans.

A cautionary word may help the reader keep that ambiguous truth in mind. Because of my interest in organized forms of white reaction, parts of the book record the activities of the most activist and defensive cadres in Canarsie. While I duly note the more generous and progressive strains in the community, it does bear warning here that in a few chapters conservative activists and organizations assume a prominence that does not truly reflect the range of Canarsie opinion.

The book has another kind of emphasis. Above all, it highlights the uniqueness of Canarsians' experience of the world. The people of Canarsie are a vivid lot. They can be engaging, high-flown, poignant, racist, sarcastic, bawdy. The narrative style I have chosen enhances that impression of their distinctiveness; I have let them tell much of the story in their own words, and I have kept my own theoretical preoccupations in the background. As a result, it is important to affirm that essential axiom of comparative sociology: people's grievances are reflections of general laws as well as unrepeatable expressions of their own singularity.

The point of view has a more fundamental consequence. Only rarely do blacks interrupt the flow of white narrative to judge, to reflect, to impugn; only rarely do I abandon scholarly detachment, place myself at the center of the action, and offer a personal verdict.