

The future once happened here

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TO ROSIE AND HER SISTERS



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## Introduction

Former San Jose mayor Tom McEnery attended a meeting of the preeminent urban policy organization, the United States Conference of Mayors. The organization's Washington headquarters is adorned with a large picture of President Franklin Roosevelt and with framed correspondence describing his close relationship with the mayors of the great cities:

Late in the day, "as yet another speaker droned on about the pressing need for increased federal assistance to the cities," says McEnery, the host, Mayor Marion Barry, finally showed up. Barry, dressed in the "red warm-up suit he must have slept in, slumped into the chair next to [McEnery] and closed his eyes." McEnery goes on: "Suddenly, Marion Barry came alive, interrupting the speaker [to] blurt out a few non sequiturs." Jaws dropped to the sound of nervous laughter, and the conferees gazed in disbelief as Barry rambled on. Finally, he slumped back into his chair beside McEnery, apparently satisfied that he had made his point. "Politely, we all acted as if nothing happened," says McEnery. The speaker responded with, "Excellent point, Marion. Now back on the subject of block grants." McEnery concludes, "I have never shuffled my papers as intently as I did the rest of the meeting."

In a sense, what happened with Marion Barry at the U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting was not unusual. The leading lights of urban liberalism had been averting their eyes for decades. For thirty years the mayors had been defining the big city as a welter of woes whose ruin would be rewarded with financial aid from the federal government. When failure begat failure, the venerable U.S. Conference of Mayors, begun by the legendary mayors James Michael Curley of Boston and Fiorello La Guardia of New York, persisted in



pursuing policies that presented the cities as the hopeless victims of racism and governmental neglect. These once great centers of commerce and innovation redefined themselves in terms of both their dependent populations and their fiscal dependence on Washington.

The upshot has been that the cities run along liberal lines have, like Marion Barry, fallen from public grace. Cities, says veteran analyst George Grier, have been “gaining more problems than voters over the past three decades.” Cities have become the symbols of government policy and society gone awry. Says Mayor Michael White of Cleveland, “Big cities [became] a code name for a lot of things: for minorities, for crumbling neighborhoods, for crime, for everything that America has moved away from.”

Once upon a time, big cities and their liberal ethos were at the very center of national political and economic life. Born in the big cities, modern liberalism eventually died there. It first emerged in the 1920s, a triumph of the urbane and the tolerant over the rural and the repressive, culminating in the 1933 repeal of prohibition. It came of age in FDR’s 1936 landslide presidential victory, when the New Deal shifted from a rural to an urban base and big government became a permanent part of American life.

The big cities, which had successfully integrated the vast turn-of-the-century wave of immigrants, were at the heart of the coalition that remade America in the course of defeating both the Great Depression at home and dictators abroad. These are the glories former New York mayor David Dinkins spoke of when he defined the cities as “the soul of the nation.”

Confusing the past with the present, Dinkins, in the early 1990s, repeatedly asserted that “like a mighty engine, urban America pulls all of America into the future.” Former New York governor Mario Cuomo was unintentionally closer to the mark when he, evoking the era of Al Smith and FDR, noted poignantly that “the future once happened here.”

The political rise of the cities during the New Deal coincided with the end of a century of urban economic growth. The great cities of the Northeast and Midwest had been built on the conjuncture of rail and river, which centralized everything from manufacturing to merriment. A variety of new technologies—electricity, the internal combustion engine, the telephone—had begun to distribute the city’s functions over a whole region, but as early as 1923, Frank Lloyd Wright saw that “the big city is no longer modern.”

In 1930 an Atlanta editor saw the future: “When Mr. Henry Ford . . . put some kind of automobile within easy reach of almost everybody, he inadvertently created a monster that has caused more trouble in the larger cities than bootleggers, speakeasies, and alley bandits.” Long before race became the central issue in American politics, the automobile allowed middle-class whites to escape the clamor and congestion of the city, with its soot and sa-

loons, for pastoral enclaves of their own. What’s more, those enclaves were subsidized by the same New Deal so beloved of urban liberals. In 1934 the Federal Housing Authority began to insure low-interest long-term mortgages for new suburban single-family housing construction.

Both people and jobs began leaving the cities. As early as the 1930s, city planners worried about what was then called “blight” as manufacturing, once organized around the railroads, moved to cheaper exurban land serviced by trucks. In some cities, such as Baltimore, the changes were astounding: between 1929 and 1939, notes the historian John Teaford, Baltimore lost 10 percent of its manufacturing while manufacturing in its metro area grew by 250 percent. The dispersal of manufacturing and jobs was only hastened by World War II, when decentralization was a matter of national security. By 1950, 23 percent of the population would be suburban; today it is 53 percent.

To make matters more difficult for the postwar cities, the mechanization of Southern agriculture sent vast numbers of Southern sharecroppers, semiliterates with few salable skills, streaming north into the cities. In the 1940s and 1950s, people who led economically isolated lives in the South were shunted, often for racist reasons, into the isolation of public housing. Had there been no racial mien to this migration, absorbing the newcomers would still have been difficult—but doable. After all, at the turn of the century, many had feared that the vast wave of new immigrants from the “backward” lands of southern and eastern Europe would be unassimilable, but in a celebrated triumph the cities proved to be the great incubators of ethnic integration; the factories, schools, and political clubs of the big cities turned immigrants into Americans. The postwar cities had a harder time integrating their newcomers. The changes in technology dealt them a bad hand, which they then played badly. But while economic decentralization was and still is a salient source of city woes, the problems plaguing cities are also the product of public policy choices produced in the 1960s, a period of extraordinary prosperity.

The current plight of the cities is linked to a series of gigantic public policy wagers made three decades ago in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. Though now forgotten, the terms of the gambles made in the wake of the Watts riot in Los Angeles were simple enough, but the consequences have been complex and unnerving.

In the mid-1960s, urban policy makers, under the influence of a dizzying mix of guilt, fear, and hubris, decided that when it came to black and, to some extent, Hispanic America, the immigrant model of incorporation through acculturation was to be abandoned. The assumptions and institutions that allowed the newcomers from eastern and southern Europe to gain their rightful place in American life were, in the face of the riots of the sixties, to be not just modified but completely abandoned. Instead, hoping to

remedy the wrongs of racial injustice, policy makers boldly decided to bet the national (or at least the urban) future on an entirely different and untested set of premises. New Deal-era assumptions about the close connection between work and well-being, the need for a common culture, and the importance of public order were cast aside as either racist or inadequate to the needs of the new arrivals.

In the wake of his 1964 landslide victory over Barry Goldwater, President Johnson called the election “a mandate to unite this nation . . . to make this Nation whole as one nation, as one people, indivisible under God.” His admirable aim was to bring the margins into the center, to incorporate African-Americans into the larger national community. “I see a day ahead,” he would later proclaim, “with a united nation . . . one great America, free of malice and free of hate . . . bound together by common ties of confidence and affection, and common aspirations toward duty and purpose.” Civil rights were for Johnson the path to a citizenship of shared values that was to be embodied in the mutuality of government-funded social insurance programs.

Integration, however, was just a brief phase between the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the rise of the Black Power movement, between the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the full-blown emergence of black separatism, between Jim Crowism and Crow Jimism, between *colored people* and *people of color*.

New Deal liberalism, that bastard offspring of a love affair between a practicing capitalist father and a sentimentally socialist mother, has always been vulnerable to attacks from both left and right. In the sixties, simultaneous attacks from the New Right and New Left laid it low. In the cities in particular, New Deal liberalism, which had built a mild economic egalitarianism on a base of social solidarity forged in the Great Depression and World War II, was replaced with a new liberalism. Sixties liberalism yoked together an antipathy to economic markets and a faith in a free market in morals to produce what might be called “dependent individualism.” In an egalitarian pursuit of equality of outcome, sixties liberalism looked to spray economic regulations into every nook and cranny of the economy. Simultaneously morally libertarian and statist, it looked to judicially minted individual rights to undermine the traditions of social and self-restraint so as to liberate the individual from conventional mores.

The dependent individualists assumed they had the right to bear children and the state had the obligation to support them. The upshot, particularly in New York and the District of Columbia, was an extraordinary transfer of responsibility from the family to the state. It was a transfer that produced the worst of both worlds: fiscal failure and further family breakdown.

The social insurance so central to the New Deal makes sense to soften the

effects of unforeseen disaster. We have to help each other out in times of flood or widespread economic failure. Social insurance aimed to help people caught in tragedies not of their making, but no insurance system can compensate for the predictably destructive action of unmarried teens unprepared for motherhood giving birth to children who will later be unable to become self-sufficient adults.

The two halves of sixties liberalism—social license and economic restrictions—reinforced each other. Rent, zoning, and business regulation drained New York and Washington (though not Los Angeles) of their economic vitality. It left them saddled with expensive and inefficient governments and a state-supported economy of social workers and other members of the “caring professions,” who, whatever their good intentions, came to live off the personal failings of the big cities’ dependent populations.

The body of this book, which is by no means intended as a comprehensive account of what happened in New York, Los Angeles, and the District, is devoted to describing how sixties liberalism, in a series of great gambles regarding work, welfare, public order, and a common culture, reshaped the three great cities.

Why New York, Washington, and Los Angeles? In part because if power lies in telling people what to think, these three cities had been setting not just the urban but much of the national agenda. Their sphere of influence is all of America. The nineteenth-century British statesman James Bryce wrote that “the conjunction of the forces of rank, wealth, knowledge, intellect . . . makes such [cities] a sort of foundry.” In such cities “opinion is melted and cast”; then it “can be easily and swiftly propagated and diffused through the whole country.”

Politics and policy in these three cities, each a center of money, media, and government, play an outsized role in representing both liberalism and the big cities to the rest of America. The 1965 and 1992 Los Angeles riots (bookends of sorts for this essay); the Lindsay administration’s attempt to create a post-New Deal liberalism by expanding welfare and creating multicultural schools *avant la lettre*; New York’s bankruptcy; the sheer collapse of day-to-day services in Washington, D.C., under “mayor for life” Marion Barry—all have had a lasting effect on American life.

Each of these three cities represents a major tendency in American life, an experiment in ideals less fully realized in other places. Los Angeles is the centrifugal city, the center of a multiculturalism that assumes it can operate without a core of shared civic values; Washington, D.C., has been an example of black nationalism in power; and New York represents the lost world of New Deal liberalism deformed by dependent individualism, the linking together of economic overregulation with a free market in morals.

Together each of these cities has lived in the shadow of what Professor David Sears called “the riot ideology,” the assumption that the violence of the sixties riots and their criminal aftermath were both justified and, to a considerable extent, functional in rectifying the sins of racism. The power to disrupt became a claim against the treasury. Violence, or at least the threat of violence, became a way of extracting money from the federal government, if only as riot insurance. But with vast federal budget deficits and widespread black, as well as white, middle-class flight from the cities, this public sector approach to peddling pathology has played itself out.

This book’s closing chapters look at how a new generation of mayors and administrators—Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York, Mayor Richard Riordan in Los Angeles, and the Financial Control Board in the District of Columbia—have tried with mixed success to remedy the ills of their cities. For all their problems, the future of these three great cities has not been foreclosed. In New York and Los Angeles, the decline of crime and the promise of welfare reform open up possibilities for economic and social renewal unthinkable only a few years ago. As upscale Americans rediscover the charm of city density and new immigrants reclaim areas that were once wastelands, these cities have become incubators of the digital revolution. Culturally wired for creativity, equipped with fiber-optic cable, they are the centers for the software, multimedia, and Web site innovations that are reshaping both communications and the postindustrial economy. As for Washington, it is by virtue of its location so naturally rich and so well endowed with talented people that replacing the current administration would do wonders for its future.

Cities live within people as surely as people live within cities. As a son of New York City, I was weaned on a pride for her accomplishments; now I am saddened by her decline, even as I hope for her renewal. If an impassioned tone occasionally appears in my writing, it’s because this book is animated by my assumption that these are cities whose wealth and talents should have secured far better outcomes.

These pages were written from a New York very few nonnatives ever see—an integrated area of Flatbush, Brooklyn, graced with Victorian homes and shaded by giant maples. It’s only a short subway ride in one direction from a Pakistani immigrant neighborhood and in the other from the allure and energy of Manhattan. If, as they say, you want to know where I’m coming from, it’s from Beverley Road near Coney Island Avenue, a short walk from the D train.

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## 1. The Riot Ideology

During the 1993 Los Angeles mayoral election, rivals Michael Woo, a liberal Democrat, and Richard Riordan, a centrist Republican, faced a constant dilemma. Which word should they use to describe the civil disturbances that had hit L.A. twice in the past quarter century? Black leaders and the *Los Angeles Times* sometimes referred to the 1965 Watts and 1992 South Central upheavals as rebellions or uprisings. Most whites, Hispanics, and Asians called them riots. Woo went both ways. Appearing before African-American crowds, he talked of “the uprising” or “the rebellion”; otherwise, he spoke about “the riots.”

Riordan, who wasn’t nearly as smooth, had trouble figuring out how to characterize Watts. Speaking before a large black congregation on a Sunday morning, he froze when the time arrived for him to choose which word to use. Looking out at the crowd, he hesitated for several seconds; when he finally let out with “rebellion,” he sent the amused congregation into gales of laughter.

L.A. whites who talk about what to them are self-evidently riots and African-Americans who refer to “the rebellion” seem to occupy separate realities. The thirty-year debate over how to describe L.A.’s traumas is a shorthand for the larger debate over how to measure black America’s claims against the larger society. The term *riot*, with its clear connotation of aimless criminality, seems to ignore the injustice that fueled the rage. *Rebellion*, in turn, suggests that the violence was in the service of, and even secondary to, a challenge to the injustice embedded in the social order.

The Watts upheaval of 1965 was both riotous and rebellious. Primed by

the inspiring examples of African wars of independence against colonial oppression and by the Southern civil rights challenge to the rule of heavy-handed sheriffs, the violence was triggered by an incident of police brutality that suggested that blacks in L.A. were, in their own way, as subjugated as their Southern and African cousins. The anger unleashed was directed as much toward the social order that sanctioned the police as toward the police themselves. There was also a great deal of sheer criminality, as stores were wantonly looted and buildings were set aflame, all in an almost carnival-like atmosphere. But it was the aura of rebellion that gave the upheaval its larger significance.

In the early 1960s there were small riots in both the District of Columbia and Los Angeles. In 1964 there were larger, though still not major, riots in Harlem and Brooklyn; in Rochester, New York; in three New Jersey cities—Paterson, Jersey City, and Elizabeth; and in Chicago and Philadelphia. The most intense were in Harlem and Rochester. They broke out in an atmosphere of heightened expectations sixteen days after Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. On the second day of the Harlem riot, a local militant, Jesse Gray, who had been leading a series of rent strikes, called for “a hundred skilled black revolutionaries” ready to die “participating in guerrilla warfare.” Gray’s call to arms came to little at the time. Given the upcoming presidential contest between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater, the 1964 riots were considered counterproductive even by many militants. Johnson’s landslide reelection and the 1965 riot in Watts changed all that.

Watts was unlike any earlier riot. We are still living in its aftermath. Watts, the first major riot to be televised, inspired subsequent “rebellions” in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Newark. The immediate damage to Los Angeles was obvious: thirty-four people, almost all black, were dead; whole blocks had been razed; and almost four thousand arrests had been made. Much of Watts was never rebuilt, and neither was the relative optimism regarding race and integration that had briefly held sway in the wake of the historic 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington.

Many of the rioters, wrote civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin, viewed the uprising as a “manifesto,” an announcement that they were a force to be reckoned with. The Watts upheaval, said Sterling Tucker of the D.C. Urban League, “symbolically unleashed centuries of pent-up animosity.” The politicized rioters spoke more of revenge than reform, spoke not of integration but of power. They sought not to liberalize America but to liberate themselves from America.

The immediate response to Watts, which broke out five days after the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, was to see it as the work of a small

group of street toughs and criminals. The toughs were involved, but the breadth of the participation suggested something much more ominous. Los Angeles was a city with an expanding black middle class, a city that, according to a National Urban League survey, ranked first among major American cities in the quality of black life. Yet post-riot surveys showed that the rioters represented a cross section of black South Central Los Angeles. What had happened for blacks of all classes was that the surge in collective consciousness flowing out of the Southern civil rights struggle broke down barriers to the expression of the rage and hostility that had built up for so long.

The “primitive rebels” of the Watts uprising, some of them gang members, were little concerned with integration and much concerned with authenticity and the power of violence to wipe away historic humiliations. “Who has not dreamed,” asked James Baldwin, “of that fantastical violence which will drown in blood, wash away in blood, not only generation upon generation of horror, but will also release one from the individual horror, carried everywhere in the heart.”

Paul Williams, a young participant in the riots, described their almost mystical effect on him: “Everyone felt high. It was like an out-of-memory period. . . . Before you were hoping for freedom within the civil rights movement, and when you came out the other end you hoped for liberation.”

Any doubts that the rioting was far more than a protest against poverty should have been dispelled by the Detroit riots two years later. The Motor City, boasted Jerome Cavanagh, “the most progressive mayor in America,” had a large home-owning black middle class. Yet it, too, went up in flames. The Detroit rioters were asserting a collective identity, not protesting against poverty. Eighty-three percent of the Detroit rioters were employed; half of them were members of the United Auto Workers, whose policies symbolized both the bread and butter and the social successes of American liberalism since the 1930s.

Militants saw Watts as both a promising turning point in the black liberation struggle and a repudiation of integrationist liberalism, and they were not alone. What might be called the riot ideology broadly took hold not only among many blacks but among opinion and policy makers as well. Post-riot surveys showed that though whites and Latinos were resentful, the riots boosted black self-esteem. According to L.A. historian Rafael Sonenshein the riots unified, mobilized, and energized the black community politically.

Policy makers at the time didn’t fully embrace the argument of radical sociologist Robert Blauner, who insisted that “the liberal, humanist value that violence is the worst sin cannot be defended today if one is committed squarely against racism and for self-determination.” Neither did they fully

reject it. In the wake of Watts, policy makers in Washington and elsewhere were caught in a cross fire between those who insisted that more aid to the cities was essential to prevent more rioting and those who saw more aid as a reward for violence.

Speaking in the summer of 1966, Nicholas Katzenbach, President Johnson's attorney general, warned of riots in "thirty or forty" more cities if the Model Cities legislation providing funds for community renewal projects wasn't passed quickly. Critics like Bronx congressman Paul Fino denounced Katzenbach's "scare tactics," and warned that Model Cities would both reward the violence and become a "grave train" for the "black power" movement.

As the immediate threat of riots subsided, liberals would argue that more money for the cities was essential—if not to halt riots, then to contain the still rising racial anger, which expressed itself in rising rates of often violent crime. In New York, where John Lindsay was widely praised for having avoided a riot during his tenure as mayor, robbery increased fivefold between 1962 and 1967 and then doubled between 1967 and 1972.

In 1965, only conservatives, discredited by their opposition to civil rights, and a few contrarians saw the dangers from the riot ideology ahead. A distraught LBJ saw the rioters as equivalent to the Ku Klux Klan, as "lawbreakers, destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties." Larlene Wilson, a black Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) board member from Ohio, was dismayed by activists who talked of the ghetto "as if there was something romantic, glamorous, and exciting about it" but, warned that "those of us who have experienced the life of the poor, uneducated, exploited Negro (exploited by blacks and whites) and who really know what it means to hate all whites (and blacks who have 'made it') will tell you . . . it is a mistake to try to identify with the man in the streets by trying to become like him."

Ms. Wilson proved prescient, but the riot ideology has endured. After the 1992 L.A. riots, an expert on conflict resolution wrote the following in an article for the National League of Cities journal, *The National Civic Review*, on the efficacy of rioting: "In the 1960s mass rioting in Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., generated a movement for 'black power' in the streets and precedent-breaking legislative efforts in Washington. We do not know what political energies may be unleashed in the wake of the most recent disorders." Leave aside the fact that this poor fellow got the sequence of rioting and legislation backward; his was the conventional and deeply corrupting wisdom.

In the wake of the 1992 riots, Mayor John Norquist of Milwaukee attended a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, with about half the mayors of the twenty-five largest cities being present. To his dismay, he found

that they saw the riot as a potential bonanza. The country, they assumed, would have to pay attention to the cities again, and so they began to assemble a wish list for new programs to combat the violence they had officially decried. At the very least, they expected the disaster to produce a new wave of programs, as in the 1960s, for "riot insurance." These mayors had to know that the violence would scare away business, but they had come to see their cities as victims of unmet social needs and regarded their pathologies as economic assets.

Prior to the "rebellions" it was broadly assumed that blacks, newly arrived in cities like Los Angeles and Detroit, were much like earlier waves of immigrants to urban America. "Puerto Ricans today," wrote Irving Kristol in 1966 for the *New York Times Magazine*, "resemble nothing so much as the Sicilian immigrants of sixty years ago . . . one senses . . . their destiny as an immigrant group." By comparable analogy, blacks, he argued, were very much like an earlier group troubled by broken families and substance abuse, namely, the Irish, who after a long, tumultuous struggle made it into the middle class.

For those, like Kristol, who used the immigrant analogy, the similarities with earlier arrivals in the cities were what mattered. Earlier immigrants from rural Europe, so the argument went, had suffered from illiteracy, discrimination, and the lack of political clout but had nonetheless succeeded, over the course of three generations, to work their way into the mainstream of American society. They partook of a rough bargain in which they gave up some of their old ways for a new hybrid identity. With the end of legal segregation and the migrations from the economically backward South into the more advanced Northern cities, the hope was that African-Americans would follow, however haltingly, this same path.

Many of the black migrants to D.C. ("the first stop off the bus") and New York came from the backwaters of tobacco road. The most labor-intensive of the major crops, tobacco was a jealous mistress that demanded endless, painstaking labor but few of the skills useful in an urban industrial society. The long-term social yield of plantation agriculture and its sharecropping successor was a people rich in resentment. Like the Irish arriving in Boston, in-migrants to the somewhat more enlightened climes of the Northern cities could only assume that Anglo-Saxon law, a liberation for non-Irish white immigrants, was a trick imposed by the powerful to subjugate the weak. Worse yet, the black migrants from tobacco country, like the "hillbillies" in Detroit or the "Okies" who went to L.A., brought with them a tradition of violence that easily overwhelmed the capacity of city cops to contain it.



Some argued that the new black in-migrants to the Northern cities were already American and therefore didn't have to assimilate. But they did have to acculturate to urban industrial society. Rural people, as Washington, D.C., realized after the 1991 Hispanic riots there, have to learn how to live in the city. The Hispanic riots in D.C., triggered by abusive black cops, brought a torrent of complaints from middle-class blacks. Tom Porter of the left-wing Pacifica radio station WPFW summed up these feelings:

I'm tired of seeing them leave car batteries in their yard and paper plates after they have a picnic on the front steps. The parks were created for the children of the neighborhood, but some of the young [Hispanic] men have taken over the parks for drinking or drugs. People tell me I ought to understand their culture, but I guarantee you that the culture of El Salvador is *not to get drunk in public and urinate in the parks.*

Porter's complaint reads like that of a true turn-of-the-century WASP decrying the filth, stench, and squalor of "Paddies," "Hunkies," and "Wops." In Chicago the arrival of the Slovak saloons sent the WASP middle class scurrying to the suburbs and made the small neighboring city of Evanston into the headquarters of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

In the years that followed, the New Deal showed that the country had learned something about incorporating newcomers. President Roosevelt, who once began an address to the Daughters of the American Revolution with "My fellow immigrants," defined poverty as essentially a problem of cultural incorporation. Many members of his staff, influenced by the famed social reformer Jane Addams and the settlement house movement, saw incorporation as a matter of class reconciliation. They believed, with Jane Addams, that it was essential to hold all men to "one democratic standard." This meant that while the country needed to recognize the virtues of the new immigrants, the immigrants were encouraged to adopt middle-class mores.

The New Deal efforts were an enormous success. Through the growth of trade unions, immigrant political participation, and the solidarity born of war, the turn-of-the-century arrivals and their children were incorporated into American life. Between 1940 and 1965 the percentage of Americans in poverty dropped from 35 to 13 percent, about where it is today.

Schools in the District of Columbia during the 1950s were a "showcase for integration." They were also an example of the New Deal settlement house approach applied to recently arrived semiliterate tenant farmers coming from Georgia and the Carolinas. In a system where three-fourths of the teachers were already black, the old-time liberal ethos of the District's faculty meant an emphasis on inculcating "habits of orderliness and precision" cal-

culated to create self-discipline. Applying the model once used for immigrants, the teachers tried to acculturate the largely black student body by correcting their speech, appearance, and attitudes. The school leadership assumed that they were there to help the students adapt to the demands of urban life.

Only a few years later, the Watts riot, by contrast, was aimed at the agencies responsible for absorbing newcomers in Los Angeles. The rioters' anger was directed at the socializing institutions staffed by the sergeants of city life: teachers, cops, and social workers. The L.A.P.D. with its paramilitary style and racist operating assumptions was the most hated agency, but the seething hostility to government institutions extended far beyond the police to the Housing Authority, the Department of Public Health, and the Los Angeles Bureau of Public Assistance, as well as the schools. Each institution, with its white middle-class values, stood accused of serving as a crucible of humiliation for rural blacks newly arrived in L.A. Nor was it much different in New York or D.C., where semiliterate sharecroppers discovered the frustrations of dealing with what for them was a new institution—bureaucracy. It was an encounter fraught with confusion. The former sharecroppers saw in the bureaucrats a new version of "the man," who had for so long exploited their illiteracy to cheat them out of their hard-earned wages, while the bureaucrats saw the sharecroppers (whose anxiety, born of bewilderment with the big city, made them seem aggressively uncooperative) as ungrateful provincials.

For Paul Jacobs, a 1930s leftist trying to keep up with the times, the real villain was the "system," which sought to socialize black arrivals into "white ways." "Inherent in the very process of rule-making and objective analysis, there was," he argued, "a middle-class bias that makes bureaucratic authority especially burdensome on poor people." People who had already suffered so much couldn't be expected to engage in the same bargain as the immigrants, a bargain in which they agreed to both shape and be shaped by the larger society.

Jacobs was one of many intellectuals caught up in the ferment of the 1960s who rejected the immigrant path. The eminent black sociologist Kenneth Clark, who had dismissed the significance of the 1964 Harlem riot, spoke after Watts of how "the dark ghettos now represent a nuclear stock-pile which can annihilate the very foundations of America." Clark, like many others, had discarded discredited pre-Watts assumptions about mutual accommodation. Speaking at the 1965 White House Conference on Civil Rights, he insisted that blacks "must reject notions which demand that the Negro change himself and accept the requirement that the society itself must change." Clark complained, "We hear about the pathology of the Negro family [referring to

the Moynihan report on the breakdown of the black family] instead of the sickness of American society." "The problems which face us," insisted Clark, "will not be solved by seeking to manipulate the individual Negro, seeking to have him 'shape up' and 'clean up,' or as some would have him do, join the army." Under the pressure of the riots, it was society that would have to adapt itself to the Negro, and not the other way around.

In the new post-Watts world, African-Americans were to make the jump from rural life into the mainstream of American society without having to run the gauntlet of acculturation. "This struggle to be human and civilized without submitting oneself to the *whiteness* of those words, and above all without submitting to the fear of the Law which embodies them," explained literary critic Richard Gilman, "is at the heart of much passionate activity among Negroes in America today."

This was a very big gamble. What Gilman and those like him were asking for was an American version of China's Great Leap Forward. In the Great Leap, Mao decided that through the force of Leninist will, backward China would vault over all the intermediate stages of economic development and achieve an advanced economy in one sweeping surge. Like those third-world nations that had chosen to pursue a non-Western path to prosperity, American blacks were to be given their due and offered an honored place in American life without having to make the long journey up the social ladder by gradually accumulating the skills needed for economic success.

Some black activists presented their actions as part of the Third World rebellion against colonial rule. Near the end of his life even Martin Luther King began to refer to the ghetto as a "system of internal colonialism," the counterpart to the external colonialism of Vietnam. "What the Negro *has* discovered, and on an international level," wrote James Baldwin, "is the power to intimidate." If ghettos constitute a kind of colony, then it follows that the riots were more analogous to uprisings. Liberation meant more than securing rights, it meant taking control of the black community and liberating it from the "occupying army" of white police, social workers, landlords, and owners of small businesses.

In the wake of the 1968 Washington, D.C., riot that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Sterling Tucker, leader of the local Urban League, argued that the outburst was a "low form of communication by people who seek to get a response from society that seems to be deaf to their needs." Up till now the power structure, he said, had spoken with respectable, middle-class civil rights leaders, *out of touch with the street*. But now they would have to deal with "the street," and in D.C. its representative was the young Marion Barry. Fresh from fighting segregation in the deep

South, Barry warned that "when the city rebuilds . . . it might just get burned down again . . . if you don't let my black brothers control the process—and I mean all the way down to owning the property." White people, insisted Barry, "should be allowed to come back only if the majority of ownership is in the hands of blacks."

White leaders and intellectuals of goodwill got the message. They responded with a mix of guilt and fear. Guilt about three centuries of racial injustice and fear that black Americans might become irredeemably alienated from American life. "The Negro district of every large city," wrote *Fortune* editor Charles Silberman in his influential book *Crisis in Black and White*, "could come to constitute an American Casbah, with its own values and controls and an implacable hatred of everything white that would poison American life."

In a 1967 editorial titled BLOW UP THE CITIES, the highly respected and moderately liberal *New Republic* argued, with a mixture of guilt and fear, for "the promise of the riots": "Terrifying as the looting, the shooting, the arson are, they could mean a gain for the nation if, as a result, white America were shocked into looking at itself, its cities, its neglect . . . smugness and evasion."

The widely discussed editorial called the idea of Black Power a blessing even as it criticized the call by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader H. Rap Brown in Cambridge, Maryland, to "burn this town down." The editorial described the call to arson as "fascist madness." It is "the shout of the angry, exalted young Brown Shirt, called by blood to smash the shops of non-Aryans."

Written against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, the *New Republic* editorial concluded with its own madness, arguing, "The national commitment needed to bring racial justice to the cities is unlikely until New York, Chicago or Los Angeles is brought to an indefinite standstill by a well-organized guerrilla action against the white establishment." A year later, with the whiff of revolution still in the air, George Romney, governor of Michigan during the 1967 Detroit riots and then a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, warned a meeting of GOP leaders that "most Negroes are waiting to see if we mean what we say in America, or whether they have to have a war of national liberation here."

The call to "bring the war home"—seemingly possible during the most overheated moments of the sixties—was never heeded as such, but the riots themselves never fully ended. Instead, they were followed by a "rolling riot," an explosion in crime that has only now begun to subside in some cities.

In Detroit, site of the most violent upheaval and of unprecedented increases in individual crime, the collective violence of the riot was institu-

tionalized in Devil's Night outbursts. Devil's Night, the night before Halloween, became an annual carnival of destruction. In the worst years of the 1980s, four hundred buildings (almost as many as went up in the 1967 rebellion) were set ablaze. Instead of experiencing a post-riot return to relative peace, the cities continued to be engulfed in a "molecular civil war" often fought by "autistic youths" whose aim, wrote German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger, was "to debase everybody—not only their opponents but also themselves."

Violence and the threat of violence were leveraged into both a personal style for street kids and a political agenda based on threat and intimidation. To the young tough walking down the street a menacing style brought tribute by way of the frightened faces of those he had intimidated. To politicians it brought federal money on the threat that the Casbah might again erupt. But the most exquisite form of intimidation came in intellectual life, where cowed intellectuals relinquished their independence of judgment.

No one can date precisely when this political correctness *avant la lettre* took hold, but Richard Gilman's 1968 review of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* is a good bet. Cleaver was a great admirer of Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist leader of the 1920s whose Back to Africa movement was the largest political mobilization of blacks prior to the 1960s. While in a California prison for rape, Cleaver became an adherent of one of Garvey's heirs—the black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad—and later followed Malcolm X when he split off from Elijah. After his release from prison, Cleaver became the most famous convert to the Black Panther Party.

Cleaver spent 1956 to 1966 at San Quentin trying to think through the connection between violence and black nationalism. Unlike most immigrants (except the Irish), for whom Anglo-Saxon law was a liberation, black America experienced law as an instrument of oppression. In a famous line from *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver wrote that for a black man "rape was an insurrectionary act." He admitted, "It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values." Cleaver defined black convicts as "prisoners of war" in the battle between separate black and white cultures. Prisoners, he argued, were "the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel [the prisoners'] own malefactions."

One problem of black nationalism was that it could never decide which piece of land to attach itself to. Garvey's plans for a homeland in Africa had deep emotional appeal, but only a handful of African-Americans actually wanted to return. Others, inspired by Stalin's supposed solution to the nationalities question in the Soviet Union, proposed a homeland in the Southern Black Belt. But this, too, went nowhere. Cleaver understood violence as a

kind of "psychological emigrationism," as an alienation from white values and an attempt, in Stokely Carmichael's words, to "smash everything Western civilization has created." The remedy for the alienation, Cleaver argued, was Black Power, understood as black "sovereignty." But sovereignty over what? Other Panthers, like David Hilliard, supplied the answer in their call for the mininationalism of black community control over the ghetto.

When a young white radical from Students for a Democratic Society objected to the potential abuse in the Panther proposal for community control of the police, Panther Bobby Seale denounced "those little bourgeois, snooty nose, motherfucking SDSs." Black control over black neighborhoods had to be total. "To decentralize . . . implement probably on just the community level—socialism. And that's probably too Marxist-Leninist for those motherfuckers to understand," explained Seale's comrade David Hilliard. "But," he went on, "we think that Stalin was very clear in this concept, that socialism could be implemented in one country; we say it can be implemented in one community."

For Richard Gilman, writing in the *New Republic* about *Soul on Ice*, the black homeland resided in the territory of separate truths, truths based on myth more than measurement. Negroes, he argued, are oppressed by the Western liberal beliefs in a shared humanity, in universal values. Cleaver's "way of looking at the world, its formulation of experience," wrote Gilman, "is not the potential possession—even by imaginative appropriation—of us all; hard, local, intransigent, alien, it remains in some sense unassimilable for those of us who aren't black." The Negro, explained Gilman, "doesn't feel the same way whites do, nor does he think like whites."

The young Marion Barry adopted Cleaver's perspective. Once an integrationist, Barry came to view black and white culture as if they were strictly separate entities sealed off in windowless rooms. "There's a black culture, and there's a white culture; there's a black psychology, and there's a white psychology," Barry argued. "You can't plan for black people like you can for white people because there is a difference." Nor, by extension, could black city government be held to the same standards as white city government.

The black writer Jervis Anderson responded to Gilman and other separatists in *Commentary*. Anderson agreed that for Cleaver blackness is an absolute standard against which all else is evaluated. But Anderson then asked why if "we judge foreign literature by the standards we know . . . we need separate standards by which to judge writing by black Americans." It was an effective response, but at a time when liberals were willing to accept that they could know nothing about nonwhites, Cleaver and his apologists carried the day.

Blacks, wrote Gilman, have chosen to live by a set of new myths. "It isn't my right to . . . subject [their choice] to the scrutiny of the [Western] tradition. A myth, moreover, is not really analyzable and certainly not something which one can call untrue," he wrote. Nor, he should have noted, do policies based on myth carry the capacity for self-evaluation and self-correction.

The myth the militants proposed to live by—a myth of cleansing, redemptive violence—was best expressed by Frantz Fanon, a French-speaking psychiatrist who was born in Martinique and had fought with the Free French in World War II only to turn violently against the French in particular and the West in general during the bloody Algerian war of independence. In his most important book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argued that the task of the world's dark-skinned peasants, people uncorrupted by Western values, was to recover their nations and their manhood by rising up against their oppressors. He insisted that "violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths" and frees them from "despair and inaction."

Fanon died at age thirty-six in 1961, but *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in the United States just before Watts, became in the wake of the riots the book that seemed to explain what had happened. Don Watts, editor of *Liberator* magazine, described Fanon's impact:

These cats are ready to die for something. And they know why. They all read. Read a lot. Not one of them hasn't read the "Bible," Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. . . . Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon.

Fanon was himself the product of a European education. His vision of a therapeutic war on whiteness was deeply derivative of European thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler. The latter saw Western civilization as tottering and decayed, ready to be replaced by more vital, more spiritual non-Western cultures. The French writer Jean-Paul Sartre contributed an introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth* even more inflammatory than the body of the book. It was no more possible to banish European influence than to imagine African-Americans as purebred Africans or American culture as purely white.

In the debate over the immigrant analogy, neither the black nationalist mythmakers nor those who insisted that blacks could fit easily into the old immigrant mold were willing to deal with the specificities of black history that made Negroes both deeply American and deeply different from other Americans. After noting the ways in which American Negroes were unlike black Africans and white Americans, James Baldwin concluded that "the

American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors." But instead of dealing with that uniqueness, instead of adapting to it, those who argued for acculturation fled in the face of racial inductive, and the field was tragically left to the half-truths of the nationalists. Those half-truths, explained Kenneth Clark, were a "very real threat" to "middle-class and middle-class-aspiring blacks." Clark warned that "part of the pattern of pretense and posturing" associated with black nationalism ascribed "all middle-class values to whites while reserving for the exclusive use of blacks the uncouth and the vulgar."

Caught up in the mythmaking, the white sociologist Robert Blauner explained, "If we are going to swing with these revolutionary times, we will have to learn to live with conflict, confrontation, constant change, and what may be real or apparent chaos and disorder." Not everyone wanted to "swing," but for those who did, like New York's Mayor John Lindsay, the message was clear: Be prepared to pay up or be prepared for trouble. In the decades that followed the 1960s, the riot ideology, a racial version of collective bargaining, became part of the warp and woof of big-city politics.

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NEW YORK



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## 2. The New Deal City

*It is difficult to fully convey the religious fervor attached to New York's socialist, Communist, and trade union movements of the 1930s. More than just a struggle for self-interest on the part of poor people, the moral fervor of the often Jewish socialists came from the conviction that they represented an alternative ethic to the "weakest to the wall" practices of capitalism. In pursuing the path to a higher morality, they believed that they, not the bosses, represented the highest ethical ideals of the Western world.*

*In the 1930s, says literary critic Lionel Abel, the city's intellectuals "went to Russia and spent most of the decade there. . . . New York became the most interesting part of the Soviet Union . . . the one part of that country in which the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky could be openly expressed. And was! And how!"*

*I felt the aftershocks of the 1930s when I, as a small boy in the 1950s, had the good fortune to listen to endless debates in my grandfather's apartment on topics ranging from the promise of socialism to the perfidy of Lenin—my grandfather and his friends were militantly anti-Communist socialists, members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)—and on the greatness of Norman Thomas; the moral necessity of Israel; the importance of FDR; the immorality of the profit motive; and, on one occasion, the gutsiness of La Guardia. I can still remember one of my grandfather's friends gesticulating wildly, his expression denunciatory, as he attacked La Guardia for being far too eager to do business with the Communists, then a formidable force in New York City politics and trade unions. My grandfather, a staunch anti-Communist, answered: "Morris [I*

*think the friend's name was Morris], you're taking things out of context. In the mid-1930s the union was fighting for its life and La Guardia was there fighting for us." "La Guardia," declared another friend, "made New York into a city fit for workers." And so he did.*

In the early 1940s, while the United States and the USSR were allied in the war against fascism, a trade delegation from the Soviet Union, dressed in its diplomatic finery, visited New York's legendary mayor Fiorello La Guardia. Something of a socialist himself, La Guardia looked at the Soviet diplomats and then at his own baggy pants and frayed shirt. "Gentleman," he said, "I represent the proletariat." Indeed he did. In the best traditions of European democratic socialism and social democracy, La Guardia had tried to transform New York into the New Deal city, a workers' city where government was on the side of the laboring stiff and not the bosses.

La Guardia, a nominal Republican, had been elected in 1933 by a *mésalliance* of good government Protestants, newly mobilized Italians, and left-wing militants. "I am for the Republicanism of Abraham Lincoln," he explained, "and let me tell you now that the average Republican leader east of the Mississippi doesn't know anything more about Abraham Lincoln than Henry Ford knows about the Talmud." By the time he was up for reelection, La Guardia locally, and to a lesser extent the New Deal nationally, had a new base: the forces of organized labor, particularly the New York needles trade unions, energized by the New Deal and the Wagner Act.

La Guardia, who was half Italian and half Jewish, had been raised in Arizona. His Western experiences gave the radicalism of the city's immigrant masses an American touch. La Guardia issued the classic rallying cry of early-twentieth-century American reform, the majoritarian call to support the people in their struggle against the "interests." The people, understood to be virtuous and inherently democratic, were said to be threatened by the special privileges afforded the new aristocracy, the "economic royalists" whose concentrated power threatened the rights of self-government. It was a theme whose dramatic power was useful not only in spreading the message but in allowing liberals to explain their message to themselves.

"The forces of organized money," La Guardia liked to boast, "are unanimous in their hatred of me." Cheering on the city's strikers, Fiorello pledged to make New York a "one hundred percent union town." He used his mayoral powers, notes historian Thomas Kessner, to force business to the bargaining table, and when cabbies turned violent to achieve their ends, he

turned a blind eye. When business threatened to bolt the city, he threatened back, promising to blacklist anyone who left. Some, tired of his bullying, autocratic ways, mocked him as a "miniature Mussolini."

In no city is the New Deal more revered than in New York. In my childhood home, as with many second-generation New York immigrant families, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were household deities. And yet in no city is the New Deal more misunderstood. This is no small matter, since the policies adopted in the 1930s are still deeply embedded in the structure of politics and government.

La Guardia and Roosevelt still cast a giant shadow over 1990s New York. New York's Mayor Giuliani—who, like Fiorello, was elected as a fusion candidate—constantly compares himself to La Guardia, while Mario Cuomo, New York State governor from 1982 to 1994, saw his "New York idea" as an extension of the New Deal model.

The reasons for the reverence are clear and compelling. When La Guardia was elected mayor in 1933, the city was effectively bankrupt, in the hands of J. P. Morgan and other creditors, and suffering unemployment rates of 25 percent and more. Both the Tammany Hall political machine, which had brought on the bankruptcy, and old-fashioned capitalism were discredited. La Guardia stepped into the vacuum. He was, he said, in the "position of an artist or a sculptor" ready to reshape New York's future.

Even before taking office, La Guardia helped Harry Hopkins design Roosevelt's Civil Works Administration (CWA); then, as mayor, he turned around and took advantage of it. New York captured 20 percent of all CWA job slots. Shuttleing back and forth from Washington and sharing advisers like New Deal architects Adolf Berle and Rexford Tugwell, La Guardia struck a deal with FDR: If Roosevelt, a country squire with little love for the sidewalks of New York, treated the city generously, La Guardia would make Gotham into the New Deal's model city.

Both sides kept the bargain. Roosevelt broke precedent by treating New York City as "the forty-ninth state." FDR dealt directly with city hall, bypassing Albany and ignoring the 150 years of precedent that treated cities as mere creatures of the states. FDR poured \$50 million into New York during La Guardia's first one hundred days, and La Guardia and his parks commissioner, the formidable Robert Moses, made sure the money was well spent. The man La Guardia appointed to head the local CWA placed two hundred thousand men on projects in three months (and then collapsed and died). Moses whipped the city bureaucracy into shape. He fired all five borough parks commissioners, people who had been patronage appointees, and

imposed new administrators, who, under his iron tutelage, refurbished streets, parks, and public buildings.

In charge of sixty-eight thousand parks workers, many of them formerly unemployed men without hope, Moses gave them uniforms and put them to work. "Within 6 months," writes historian John Teaford, "every structure in the municipal parks was repainted, every lawn reseeded, every tennis court and playground resurfaced, and thousands of trees were removed, replanted and pruned." Here was the beginning of New York's local version of public works Keynesianism. The CWA, as Harry Hopkins explained, gave the once unemployed money to spend and "brightened the retailers' tills."

La Guardia became a master at "milking money from the federal government." Twice a week he was in Washington, where he enjoyed extraordinary access to the president. Half joking, FDR said of La Guardia, "Our mayor is probably the most appealing person I know. He comes to Washington and tells me a sad story. The tears run down my cheeks and tears run down his cheeks and the first thing I know, he has wangled another fifty million dollars." In fact, from 1934 to 1938 New York City received more than 1.15 billion for public works from the CWA, PWA (Public Works Administration) and WPA (Works Progress Administration). The critics, in part responding to a long history of Tammany's make-work boondoggles, said the letters WPA meant "we plod along," since completion of a project meant people were again out of work. But under the pushing and prodding of La Guardia, who would personally visit work sites and fire people on the spot if they were loafing, the city gained acclaim for both itself and the New Deal.

A 1939 article in staid *Harpers* boasted that New York City "happens to be one of the communities in the United States where good government is measured by getting a good deal for your money." The flamboyant "Kingfish," Huey Long of Louisiana, called La Guardia's New York "the best blankety-blank governed city in the country." New York's port, the Kingfish exuded, "is the best-managed port there is, the traffic system is wonderful, and the waterworks is the goddamned marvel of the world."

Federal grants and loans literally reshaped the city. Working closely with fellow New Yorker Harold Ickes of the PWA, Moses built the East River Drive; the Henry Hudson, Grand Central, Cross Island, Gowanus, and Interborough Parkways; the Triborough Bridge; the Lincoln Tunnel; the Queens Midtown Tunnel; and Marine Parkway, as well as piers, public schools, public housing projects, public baths, parks, prisons, parkways, paved streets, Hunter and Brooklyn colleges, boardwalks, swimming pools, and on and on. Upon entering office, wrote Thomas Kessner, La Guardia had to "beg a reluctant Albany for 30 million dollars to get out of the fiscal crisis, [but] two years later

he was negotiating directly with Washington for 10 times that amount." Shortly after Fiorello entered office, the city had half a million people on relief; by 1943 that number, owing to World War II, was down to seventy-three thousand, not even a hundred of whom were employable.

At the turn of the century, Tammany Hall, under the remarkable boss Charles Murphy, had begun the job of integrating the new immigrants politically. La Guardia completed the job by tutoring the new immigrants socially and by opening up city government to the non-Irish. Murphy seized upon the outrage produced by the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, when 146 workers died in a burning building, to remake the city's political culture.

The appeal of socialism to Jewish trade unionists pushed Tammany to the left on social and labor issues. Murphy's formula was jobs for the Irish and a mix of anti-anti-Semitism and social liberalism for the Jews, who, employed in the needles trade, didn't need government work. Governor Al Smith, a Murphy protégé, heavily influenced by Jewish leftist and settlement house intellectuals, pioneered the safety protections for workers that would be given national scope with the New Deal. Boss Murphy's Tammany Hall, said New York Senator Robert Wagner, another of Murphy's protégés, was "the cradle of modern liberalism in America."

What La Guardia added was a distinct class, as opposed to ethnic edge, to New York liberalism. In part, La Guardia had a visceral hostility to the bosses. Even in the boom time of the 1920s La Guardia distrusted free markets and hoped to "soak the rich." Running for mayor against "Gentleman" Jimmy Walker in 1929, La Guardia, with his left-wing views, garnered only 26 percent of the vote. But four years later, armed in part by Robert Wagner's theory of the depression, La Guardia's time had come.

Wagner, author of what was probably the single most important piece of New Deal legislation, the Wagner Act, which gave unions the right to bargain collectively with government protection, believed the depression was a matter of underconsumption. An intuitive Keynesian even before Keynes's writing arrived in the United States, Wagner argued that the depression would only end when the government placed more purchasing power in the hands of the average worker. Wagner also argued that corporate power could only be contained by creating a countervailing power through trade unions.

Together La Guardia and Wagner, who had been inspired by the municipal housing in Austria's "Red Vienna," not only pioneered the first and initially very successful public housing projects but also created the Cultural Center for the Performing Arts and established public hospitals and the

Health Insurance Plan of New York (HIP) medical insurance plan for people earning less than five thousand dollars a year.

Asked why there was such emphasis on high culture, one old socialist responded, "Nothing's too good for the working class." In fact, it might have been better stated as "Nothing is too good for that part of the working class that strives to uplift itself."

The emphasis on uplift spoke to the implicit bargain at the heart of the "workers' city" ideal; that is, the city would provide the means to a decent life only to those willing to pursue their own interests through disciplined efforts. The bargain was based on reciprocity. It assumed that only if people are willing to pull their own weight can they be counted on to cooperate in sharing another's burdens. New Yorkers were quick to denounce those who could work hard but did not as bums, freeloaders, and—if they were left-wing enough—parasites.

In the workers' city, public spending came with a paternalist twist. A turn-of-the-century article in *Harper's* described the rough thrust of earlier assimilation efforts. Gary, Indiana, it said, "takes the human product of the Balkan states, brutal, unlettered, in some cases little better than a cave dweller; it gives him a white man's house to live in and hires people to teach him how to live the white man's way." New York paternalism thirty years later was far more gentle, far more a product of the settlement house ethos of tolerance and inclusion along with acculturation, but it, too, looked to uplift the new immigrants.

The nation's first public housing projects, designed, by both New Dealer Ickes and the city, to be a model for the country, carefully screened incoming tenants. The projects were designed to spur civic pride. The all-white Williamsburg projects had a kindergarten; a nursery, where mothers were given instruction in baby care; a day-care center; and a communal meeting room, where, historian Thomas Kessner explains, tenants were to be tutored on personal and civic responsibility. The young women sent by the city to collect the rent every week or two were "instructed to chat with the families and gently ascertain if they needed any help."

If the advice families were given wasn't enough, they could get plenty of suggestions from the mayor, who in a successful attempt to create a common culture out of the city's ethnic kaleidoscope devoted his radio broadcast to what foods people should buy, the best methods of child rearing, and the dangers of gambling. The mayor, a patron of proletarian theater, tried to protect his people from sin; he smashed one-armed bandits, pulled pornography off the newsstands, and punished city employees who engaged in extramarital affairs. After visiting an exhibition of Irish art, *La Guardia* summed up his

worldview: "Any people that insist on progressive government and maintain conservative art are pretty well balanced." Solidarity and loyalty were the mayor's bywords; his was to be a virtuous city, a New York of civic-minded people.

The relentless emphasis on virtue may seem harshly constrictive to contemporary Americans, but it's why workers saw themselves as morally superior to their bosses. It's part of why New York's social democracy succeeded for a time. The workers' city was forged from the solidarity of trade union struggles and stiffened by an often religiously acquired sense of self-restraint and mutuality, essential for day-to-day life in the city's tightly knit ethnic neighborhoods. According to author David Gelernter, it was a culture of "oughts." The "oughts" instilled by society were "an all-day everyday hand on your shoulder." *La Guardia's* genius was to combine the disparate elements of social solidarity—the religious, the radical, and the tribal—and forge them into a higher ethos, an ethos that would for a time come to inspire the nation at large.

In the 1920s New York seemed marginal to the rest of America. Under the weight of immigration, New York, a land of saloons, was "sliding away from the rest of the country," said H. L. Mencken. "What New York esteems," wrote Mencken, "is diabolical to Kansas." Before the 1929 Wall Street crash, New York was reviled as the home of Wall Street's financial imperialism and the Delancy Street cultural invasion. But just as the crash and the depression lifted *La Guardia* from political marginality in his own city, so too did they enhance New York's reputation. Suddenly the city and the state traditions of settlement house social work and bread-and-butter liberalism were brought to the center of national life, offering an alternative to the failures of *laissez-faire*.

New York City, which had twenty-two congressmen and had cast one of every fourteen votes in the presidential elections, had become a political colossus. The Republicans' strategy for winning the 1944 election consisted of putting a New Yorker, Governor Thomas E. Dewey, at the head of the ticket while attacking another New Yorker, Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers and a key FDR supporter, with billboards that subtly played to both anti-Semitic and anti-Communist fears with the words "IT'S YOUR COUNTRY. WHY LET SIDNEY HILLMAN RUN IT?"

But the crowds of trade unionists from the ILGWU and other unions that lined the streets of New York for Roosevelt's campaign motorcade through the city in October 1944 felt that both the city and the country were theirs. They were cheering not only FDR, who was for many their champion against Hitler, but how far they had come in moving to the center of American life. It was a satisfying, if passing, moment.