Right to Housing, Right to the City:

Civil Society Activism and Anti-Gentrification Resistance in New York City

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In 2004, a group of immigrants residing in the Manhattan neighborhood of El Barrio—otherwise known as Spanish, or East, Harlem—convened to discuss how they would prevent their landlord, Steven Kessner, from evicting more low-income tenants in this historically Puerto Rican enclave (Gourd-Wartofsky, 2008; Shah, 2008). This group would emerge as a new grassroots organization called the Movement for Justice in El Barrio (MJB), and Kessner was to be their slumlord target. Kessner, a multimillionaire whose multiple properties in the neighborhood were cited with thousands of housing violations by the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, was easily voted one of the ten worst city landlords by the *Village Voice* in 2006 While the MJB was successful in enacting a sequence of small victories against Kessner—winning, quite literally, building by building—the situation worsened in 2007 when Kessner sold 47 of his East Harlem properties to another firm for an impressive $490 million. MJB activists would now contend with a more formidable opponent: the Dawnay, Day group, a multi-billion dollar London-based investment bank with properties in such places as the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, India, and Australia.

The intentions of the bank, whose efforts would affect thousands of El Barrio residents, were far from secretive. According to Christine Haughney of *The New York Times*:

"The plan, in a gentrifying neighborhood, was to repeat the success its executives once found in the transformation of the south London neighborhood of Brixton. Dawnay, Day would ease out its mainly lower-income residents, rehabilitate the apartments and charge a new generation of younger, more affluent tenants substantially steeper rents" [Haughney, C. (2009, Dec. 21) The New York Times]

Fortunately for the MJB and El Barrio residents, however, Dawnay, Day was never really able to implement this plan of 'rehabilitating' El Barrio. As with many other banks the world over, the great subprime mortgage crisis submerged the corporation, and all 47 buildings went into receivership in October 2009 (Correal, 2010). By this point, the story should seem quite familiar: as with other banks, Dawnay, Day became saddled with insuperable debts and became part of one of the largest real estate

insolvencies of 2008. The fate of the residents, on the other hand, remains unclear as many of the housing conditions of the foreclosed homes, such as poor plumbing and inadequate heat, persist.

In the meantime, one question arises that is relevant for its implications for the current state of American grassroots organizing: would this battle against a powerful, capital-hoarding real estate proprietor based thousands of miles away have been won *without* the collapse of the financial markets? Unfortunately, cases like the one against Dawnay, Day are all too common and hardly, if ever, surface into public media streams. Even fewer of these cases, like this one, actually prove victorious. Considering this, it may not be surprising that, after all these years, only one published article in the *New York Times*' archives search engine appears with information about the case against Dawnay Day—and that one, published only *after* the bank's downfall. If any comprehensive information on the case is to be found, it is in the new cyber-forums of alternative and independent media, including anarchist, socialist, and otherwise social justice-affiliated organizational websites and publications (Dean, 2007; Gourd-Wartofsky, 2008; Maccani, 2010). As many have argued, this particular relationship between communications media and resistance movements is reflective of the current conditions of postmodernity—a phenomenon with wide-ranging impacts on "grassroots" civil society.

That an investment bank like Dawnay, Day, replete with capital holdings across multiple national borders, is capable of impacting the everyday livelihood of thousands of East Harlemites several miles across the Atlantic is indicative of a transformation with roots in a rapidly changing global political economy. Today, in what Manuel Castells (2004) subsumes under the products of our current 'information age,' the rapid-fire transmission of data through the variegated media of networked technology has produced a compression of space and time that is at odds with the spatial anchoring of inhabitants and their communities. The hyper-vamped linkages between migration (which involves the movement of *peoples* naturally bound to social communities) and labor (which is commodified and more readily 'shipped' abroad) have also compelled a modification of the traditional, immovable and immutable *home*. As many social scientists are apt to point out, the connections between finance capital, deregulatory economic policies, and the displacement of the poor are more intimately intertwined than ever before. Here, it is argued that for there to be a comprehensive examination of gentrification—what has largely been characterized as the displacement of the urban poor by the wealthier (Lees et al, 2008)—it is imperative that the changes witnessed at the local level be contextualized within a broader social ecology. Underlying the significant changes in the meanings of space and place are the restructured linkages between volatile, inconstant global capital and the transformations of the

metropolitan landscape, both of which are to be understood as being in continual tension with the permanence of communities.

Interestingly, what has largely been typified as endemic to the new 'globalization'—that is, the rapidity of information transfers and the computerization of human knowledge—has also played a critical role in the resolution of the problems of a smaller planet. If neoliberalism has become ideologically hegemonic through the promulgation of libertarian principles, and institutionally coerced through powerful bodies like the IMF and World Bank, it can also be said that an expanding web of resistance made of interconnected movements has cemented under the threat of mutual enemies. The Internet, and the relative ease by which resources, information, and human bodies can move today, have acted as the adhesive uniting otherwise disparate groups and struggles (as seen, most saliently, in the recent spate of global uprisings starting with the Arab Spring). Indeed, the Movement for Justice in El Barrio is itself a product of such resistant, globalized formations: formed by members with connections to the Zapatista movement of Chiapas, Mexico, its work has been characterized as "urban zapatismo in the heart of New York City" (Maccani, 2010). Connected internationally to other social justice organizations through the Other Campaign, MJB is but a single player within what Kaldor (2003b) and others have famously characterized as 'global civil society.' Today, the formation of transnational advocacy networks and revanchist counter-publics is suggestive of a demand for authentic social transformation at the global level, one that is in defiance of the naturalization of material inequalities and spatial alterations.

Gentrification, a term first coined by Marxist sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 (Lees et al 2008) can—and should—be seen as one aspect of a very complex constellation of economic, social, and cultural processes rooted in the sort dynamical tensions just outlined. While gentrification, whose etymological origins refer quite literally to urban displacement by a gentry, has not always been directly connected to the changes of the 'new policy agenda,' the linkages today are prominent enough to lead one scholar to dub gentrification the 'knife-edge neighborhood-based manifestation of neoliberalism" (Hackworth 2007:149). As one of three distinctive global cities (Sassen, 2001) whose function as the nexus of information and capital flows makes it an integral player in the global economy, New York City is an especially suitable object of study for what will here be referred to as the 'new' gentrification. In addition to New York's importance as home to a nascent cosmopolitan elite (Moody, 2007), there is also the geohistorical understanding, notably promoted by political geographer David Harvey (2005), that New York served as the country's laboratory for the implementation of neoliberal policies following the

city's infamous 1975 bankruptcy. For many, this moment—two years after the OPEC crisis—was a turning point not just in the history of New York but in the wider-ranging history of global neoliberalism.

Yet, while a proliferation of literature currently exists examining the history, mechanisms, and dynamics of urban transformations and community displacements, much of this literature has thus far failed to fully integrate a theoretical examination of structural processes with a bottom-up assessment from the eyes of individual agents. This essay merely seeks to scratch the surface of a potential resolution to this gap by examining the current state of the anti-gentrification movement in New York City and integrating much of the most recent theoretical literature in gentrification, civil society, and neoliberal urbanism. Lack of space prevents a more comprehensive review of the extant literature on gentrification and the processes involved in its provenance. Nevertheless, what is hoped to be offered here is an explanation for why anti-gentrification resistance provides us with considerable insight into the significance of the so-called 'third wave movement' (Kaldor, 2003a; Castells, 2004)—a collection of public resistances and actions that takes the development of civil society, the right to public participation, and the right to self-determination and democracy as central objectives. The struggles within New York can be readily seen as a window to understanding the emergence and expansion of an explicitly anti-neoliberal movement worldwide, as exemplified most famously by the Zapatista rebellion of 1994, the anti-WTO Seattle demonstrations of 1999, and the revolutionary waves that convulsed such disparate cities as Cairo, Istanbul, and São Paolo in 2013. What is evident within all this is the rising prominence of civil society actors in the counter-offensive against corporate expansion as well as in the forging of a 'third way' beyond the market and the state. Here, an examination of the central significance of civil society politics in the post-Cold War era and academia will be followed by an overview of gentrification struggles that both constitute, and aim for, the development of a democratic civil society.

Theorizing a Democratic, Urban Civil Society

In contemporary usage, 'civil society' typically refers to an amalgam of associational institutions and networks in the form of social movements, NGOs, or non-profit organizations (Kaldor 2003b:21; Van Til, 2000). In her study of the various historical contexts in which civil society has been used as a term of discourse, Mary Kaldor (2003b) reveals a concept whose origins trace back to classical antiquity, later to be formalized within the Latinate as *Societas Civilis*. Civil society has since undergone a number of

different permutations and significations: once characterized mainly by 'rule of law,' and virtually indistinguishable from the state in its seventeenth and eighteenth century incarnations, civil society has long been a focus of study within Western political philosophy. In a study of its pertinence to contemporary urbanism, however, Gramsci's definition is salient in characterizing the both subtle and coercive powers of the state in the lives of the working proletariat. Manuel Castells (2004) harkens back to Gramsci's use of civil society in his study of postmodern global information networks and suggests that Gramsci understood civil society as having a "dual character," one that perpetuated mechanisms of state control but was also "deeply rooted among the people" (cited in Castells 2004:6). Civil society, more importantly, was the site of consent formation and the enforcement of intangible forms of power—a counterpart to the visible, domineering violence perpetuated by the state. As with neoliberal philosophy more generally, one can interpret Gramscian notions of hegemonic consent as useful for grasping the persisting dynamics of state-society interactions. It is particularly germane given the role attributed to 'consent' in the formation of neoliberal urban governance structures (Harvey, 2005; Hackworth, 2007; Moody, 2007).

Today, however, civil society has been incorporated into various social configurations across the political spectrum—testament to the role of civil society discourse in the attainment of the political ends at hand. What is common to these various contemporary forms of civil society discourse, however, is a perceived correlation between civil society and democracy. Civil society, among those on the left and right, provides a check on the arbitrariness of the state; for those on the left, it also provides a voice to buffer the encroachment of unbridled capitalism (Kaldor 2003b). Among social progressives, this relationship between civil society and democracy formation traces most immediately to those social movements that arose before and after the Soviet collapse as an answer to the political failures of previous reformist and revolutionary efforts (Cohen & Arato, 1994). For Adam Michnik, one of the most distinguished proponents of civil society, "[t]he idea was that instead of trying to change the state, it was important to change the relation between state and society, to create self-organized institutions, *independent* of the state" (italics my own; Michnik 1985 quoted in Kaldor 2003b). This redirected emphasis on the self-determination of autonomous citizens, what Kaldor considers to be within an 'activist' strand of civil society, contrasts with another version based on an older, Tocquevillian tradition. This second, 'neoliberal' version of civil society emphasizes voluntary associationalism, state non-intervenionism, and notions of trust and social capital as critical to a well-functioning democracy (Van Til, 2000; Putnam, 2007; Fukuyama, 2001) In the study of activism within the postmodern metropolis, it is key that both of these competing versions of civil society be recognized and examined.

While the democratic potential for civil society is typically emphasized in third sector literature, civil society organizations are routinely marginalized in the gentrification debate as tertiary or subsidiary actors. This is in marked contrast to the state and market, the two sectors that are polarized favorably or unfavorably depending on the interpreter's political stance. This lack of recognition, however, does not minimize the increasing importance of civil society today as the increased numbers of non-profits and NGOs worldwide testify. The increased importance of civil society actors also correlates with a greater availability of funding (Edwards & Hulme, 2002) and increased complementary interactions with either the state, the market, or both. Additionally, civil society and state partnerships play an increasingly important role in shaping interurban dynamics and institutional exchanges—a fact that, regardless of whether or not it is transparent to city-dwellers, is suggestive of the widening role of the third sector in shaping individual life chances. This increased involvement has also unleashed a procession of critiques that are in response to the corresponding implications for democracy and substantive equalities. For many, the delegation of service provision functions to civil society actor when they were once within the sole domain of the state has proved problematic. Rather than acting out complementary roles, many argue that civil society has often taken a *substitutive* role, replacing elected officials accountable to their electorates with upper-class professionals with loose or perfunctory connections to the constituencies they are serving. Similarly, civil society has also been criticized for ignoring power differentials—a challenge that targets merely formal measures of equality and public participation as insufficient. The feminist critique for the need to incorporate substantive equalities is voiced through Susan Gal, who asserts that "[w]hile claiming the equality of individuals in the political realm, the idea of civil society obscures the economic and other social differences that, in practice, fundamentally constrain political participation" (Gal & Kligman, 2000:34).

Understandably, any polarized position that construes civil society as universally promoting democracy or dissolving it fails to acknowledge the contingencies of its meaning as it is appropriated within different social domains. In recognizing the plurality and diversity of voices constitutive of civil society, any assumption of the *necessity* or *inevitability* of a positive correlation with democracy or egalitarianism should be dismissed as fallacious. As one could observe in the case of New York civil society, organizations of the third sector cannot be universally abstracted as being either purely beneficial or purely detrimental to democratic developments. This said, however, the clout of competing actors is far from equal: the environmental constraints that enable for the formation and growth of certain non-profits over others is indicative of the role of institutional power in shaping *which* voices are most heard—a point made patently clear by Sabine Lang (2000) who writes: "Civil society…is not free of

power and is not an open location for rational argument and forceless decision-making processes… it is also a concept with specific traditions marked by political and economic power struggles." This view somewhat complicates the concept of civil society developed by Habermas, Arato and Cohen (1994), all of whom stress the importance of positive liberties for communicative interaction between individuals and associations. What the feminist critique adds to the original insight of public discussion and accountability is a recognition of the marginalization of subaltern voices and a problematization of the contextualized meaning of "public." For Nancy Fraser (1990), for instance, the communicative interactions that Habermas first ascribed to the public sphere implicitly privilege, and are only accessible to, an empowered minority. Within the urban environment, the feminist countercharge is easily applicable to the countless millions who are not inscribed within the prototypical civil society.

The sort of everyday, communicative politics alluded to within the feminist critique also plays out in the streets of the contemporary global neoliberal metropolis. Indeed, within the city whose function as a node of exchange for capital, information, and resources must, in the inevitable situations promoted through this agglomeration, force it to serve as the locus for public deliberation, countless spaces for alternative speakings and dissensions continually re-create themselves. While the significance of these counter-spaces to civil society activism needs no explanation, persistent fragmentation of such spaces also do not serve the interests of activists. Indeed, the importance of public spaces to participatory democracy within the city (and beyond) is commonly acknowledged (Irazabal, 2008) and for the many incapable of accessing means of communication predicated on private property holding, public spaces are non-trivial sites for information-sharing and collective expressions of resistance. Increasingly, the erosion of truly *public* spaces has become a pivotal strategy of social control within neoliberal governance. Spatial barriers manifest through the privatization of communities and limited transportation routes now supplement material inaccessibilities in the regulation of peoples and their environments. The privatization of entire communities, lands, and otherwise public resources lends itself to the formation of a host of social exclusions maintained, regulated, and surveilled by a Panopticon state. The results of the minimization of spaces for alternative gatherings and public dissent can thus be anticipated in the reformulation of civil society, as witnessed by its cooptation by state and market forces and visible to a large degree within the context of New York City; here, as elsewhere, we can see the subversion of explicit forms of radical dissent once popular during the height of welfare reformism in the '60s and early '70s. It within this new context that civil society has been forced to re-adapt itself, perhaps explaining the rise of the sort of divergent 'versions' Kaldor has denominated in her carefully researched nomenclature. Today, the resistance against gentrification by civil society actors

can, and must, be understood within the context of a neoliberal urban reform that attempts to reduce forums for dissent and which Mitchell (2003) presciently describes as calling for the constant increase of public order.

Yet, while public spaces are critical for the maintenance of a lively, activist, urban civil society, resistance is also predicated on the production of new 'counter-spaces,' a Lefebvrian concept which connotations similar to Foucault's 'heterotopias' and Fraser's 'subaltern counterpublics' (1990). What is conveyed by these concepts is a recognition of the political underpinnings of space and the role of individual and collective actions in the re-definition of space, the naming of localities, and the structuring of social realities. For Foucault, that space signified a form of power/knowledge was virtually incontestable. This understanding of space also has powerful implications: For civil society agents wishing to undermine the *status quo* of material exclusivity, it is crucial that resistance target the naturalization of exclusionary control mechanisms in the cityscape as being part and parcel of organic market transactions. The contestation over space—inherent within the power to name, re-name, and appropriate—is thus a tangible focal point around which struggles for human liberties in an egalitarian polity are substantiated. An activist, urban civil society that seeks to address the spatial exclusions of such 'natural' processes like gentrification is thus compelled to seek insightful and creative challenges to the hegemony of neoliberal thought in the regulation of metropolitan neighborhoods and public spaces.

Neoliberal Gentrification in New York City

To talk about a neoliberal New York is to discuss a system of inequities that have transformed, both literally and metaphorically, the contours of city life. The most apparent signs of the impacts of neoliberal reformism in the previous three and a half decades is apparent in the polarized distribution of capital, encapsulated only quantitatively in city statistics. Even before the 2008 market meltdown (or the Great Recession, as it has been characterized somewhat euphemistically), inequality was just as much a salient feature of New York City. Using statistics from 2005, Kim Moody illustrates the following numerical points in his narration of the history of New York's neoliberal shift: For one, the poverty rate in the nation's most populous city is twice that for the rest of the nation at 22% of residents. In Manhattan, income inequality is especially contrastive, with the top quintile of earners making 52 times that of the bottom quintile (incomparable to the ten-fold difference observed in the country at large). Additionally, whereas the Bronx has been named the poorest urban county in America, neighboring

Manhattan is renowned as a bastion of various international capitalist enterprises and home to the city's "global business and cultural elites" (Moody, 2007).

For many left-minded scholars, gentrification is another product of this neoliberalist patterning. Debates, however, center around whether gentrification itself has transformed. According to Jason Hackworth, who devotes a chapter of his *Neoliberal City* (2007) to gentrification, the displacement of urban populations induced "has long been theorized as a window into larger processes of economic and social restructuring." In his analysis, he contends that a degree of purposivity has always underlined many of the changes in urban geography, and that "the shift to entrepreneurial or neoliberal urban governance … [has been the] result of an institutionally regulated (and policed) disciplining of localities" (Hackworth 20077:17). While arguments have been made tracing the origins of gentrification to the 1950s and earlier, Hackworth and others (Lees et al 2008) suggest that gentrification today has completely altered mechanisms and objectives with a greater potential for the uprooting of entire communities. The economic mechanisms that enable for this greatly re-vamped gentrification, however, cannot be understood without an examination of the changes in the global political economy in the early to mid-1970s, to be followed by a period, between 1978 and 1980, that David Harvey (2005) specifies as leading to the institutionalization of "a new economic configuration." This shift in economic priorities, as many political economists and globalization scholars have noted, was the consequence of various cultural and fiscal prerogatives that will not be retold in detail here for lack of space.

While there exists an abundance of accounts detailing changes in the history of New York, one point of convergence has been in the undeniable turn-of-events following the city's infamous 1975 bankruptcy. Under a leftist rubric critical of the neoliberal policies to emerge, New York City has been seen as a domestic laboratory for implementation of policy suggestions that emanated from the Chicago School of Economics. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), Harvey comprehends New York City's economic restructuring at this time as pivotal to the 'construction of consent' to a neoliberal agenda that would eventually dominate national politics. While libertarian ideology, as encapsulated by such figures as F.A. Hayek and Robert Nozick, had long been in the lurch even during the peak years of the post-war welfare state, it was not until the 1970s that long-term developments (such as deindustrialization, suburbanization, and profligate borrowing) reached a point of economic crisis. By 1975, the powerful investment banks (led by Walter Wriston of Citibank) locked the city out of the bond market, leading it into a technical insolvency followed by a bail-out and austerity measures managed by new financial and state institutions. The formation of the "crisis regime" (Moody, 2007) quickly

overturned years of progressive social policies from the 1960s (during which time New York City had been a leader in welfare reform) and shifted budget priorities to the repayment of debts and the incentivization of commercial developments. This was merely the beginning of a re-direction of urban governance that would ultimately heighten intercity competitiveness and inequalities.

One central strategy in the regime change was to bolster corporate activity by substantially subsidizing corporate property taxes, even while development contributed to the hiking of property values. For Moody, this meant that working class families were caught in a "three way vise" of "housing abandonment, CBD [central business district] and luxury housing development, and gentrification" (2007:75). The end result was a reduction of available housing and the forceful upward gravitation of prices. The precise mechanisms by which property values rise is a contentious and highly nuanced phenomenon, even for well-regarded scholars in the field. Nevertheless, it is typically agreed that the rise in property values is the result of a number of key factors, including an initial disinvestment (such as that in neighborhoods, like Alphabet City, where lost factory jobs contributed to drop in property values), followed by aggressive tax-incentive programs for development (such as New York's 421-a tax abatement program for new residential construction), and finally, the purchase and reinvestment of properties. This process is made penetratingly clear in Arlene Dávila's (2004) anthropological study of El Barrio (East Harlem), where the disinvestment and urban blight of the 1970s was followed by a "neighborhood revitalization" plan that involved state-non-profit partnerships in the development of new housing units unaffordable to the average neighborhood household. Through the 1980s, under mayor Ed Koch, total property market values soared nearly threefold while the proportion city *revenue* from property taxes decreased (Moody, 2007). The landscape of the city during that decade was also one that reflected the increasing inequalities of political and economic policies, and one that is strikingly similar to some of the more recent and current policy proposals: an increase in transit fare, hikes in tuition, the closing of hospitals, and a decrease in the wealth share of the lowest quintile of households (ibid).

The recession of the early 1990s, and that of a decade later at the turn of the century, both accompanied periods of rapid gentrification. For urbanist scholars like Hackworth, Neil Smith, Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, the resounding answer to the question of whether gentrification today is different from those of previous decades is strongly in the affirmative. One of the most common contentions suggest that contemporary gentrification is more heavily driven by greater profit-seeking motives among land development and real estate firms than by preceding lower-scale individual

gentrifiers. Whereas in the past, corporate developers usually only invested in neighborhoods following low-grade investments by "pioneer" proprietors, today corporations are often the initiators of a gentrifying process that includes a mass capital investment into previously "untamed" neighborhoods (Hackworth 2007). The growth of real estate firms in this process became especially salient in the aftermath of the early '90s recession, during which time inner-city developers, real estate investment trusts, and mortgage brokers merged to create a more formidable and consolidated industry. Already-gentrified neighborhoods entered new levels of 'super-gentrification' (DeSena 2008; Lees, 2003) that resulted in a real estate monopolization of whole neighborhoods.

As with the case of Dawnay Day in El Barrio, many of these formidable agents of gentrification were ones with connections to global exchanges of capital. In the past decade, a nascent pattern in the gentrification literature has given greater prominence to the linkages between globalization, neoliberalism, and the role of the state (Smith, 2002). State involvement in gentrification and housing exclusion, in the local American context, is linked specifically to federal programs of the neoliberal age, including the Reagan Administration's 1986 Low Income Housing Tax Credit program (which established the market as the most efficient allocator of public housing) and "Self Sufficiency" program (which provided assistance to single mothers in public housing). Within the Clinton Administration, implementation of the HOPE VI program, which mandated demolition of "severely distressed" public housing units (and later followed by a 1995 allowance that no longer required replacement of the lost units), as well as passage of the 1998 Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (which mandated stricter screening of tenants and allowed public housing authorities greater leniency in evicting tenants), contributed to what Hackworth calls the "roll-back" of Keynesian institutional structures. More recently, state-private sector partnerships under mayors Giuliani (1994-2001) and Bloomberg (2002-) have resulted in yet a greater number of "affordable" housing developments that have used skewed statistical data hardly reflective of neighborhoods' average family income (Davila, 2004; Right to the City New York City Platform Report, 2009).

If subprime mortgage crisis that began in 2007 is an indicator of the direction of what some political economists have called "monopoly finance capitalism" (Foster & Magdoff, 2009) then state retrenchment from market regulation is likely to foster new waves of investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment for years to come. While Hackworth has alluded to a 'fourth wave' of gentrification as taking place in the 2000s, a time period dominated by augmented interconnections between housing and mortgage finance, it is argued here that anything short of reversal of the deregulatory drive of the

past two decades will likely foster future 'waves' of gentrification. Indeed, if Hackworth's study of gentrification in the past two recessions is of any merit, any speculations of the 'end of gentrification' in the heart of the current foreclosure crisis, as occurred in the early 1990s, are likely to be contested sometime in the future—and possibly with a greater vengeance than ever before. The proliferation of more financial 'bubbles' is only likely to facilitate an untrammeled encroachment of capital into the interstices of New York political life if changes are not forthcoming—unlikely given the extension of the Bloomberg regime. The following description, by DeSena (2008), is as apt today as before the market meltdown:

"The Bloomberg administration can be characterized by the corporatization of government, which is executed through private development and revenue production. They are brokers of global capitalism. Luxury development, through rezoning, redevelopment, and tax abatements, is believed by this administration to generate all kinds of economic activity for New York City. And much of the way that this administration produces revenue is on the backs of ordinary New Yorkers." (De Sena 2008: 69)

If regulation fails to be instituted in the near future, what will become of the livelihoods of millions of New Yorkers? What are the impending challenges of an anti-exclusion civil society? While there are considerable uncertainties regarding what will become the state of the new policy agenda and its manifestations, like gentrification, what is likely to remain is a resistance by counter-publics. While many have rejected the notion of a leftist revival predicated on tried Marxist or Keynesian principles, an anti-neoliberal resistance today must necessarily proffer an unprecedented creativity in tactics and strategies. The new alliances of the last fifteen years are testament to the considerable changes occurring deep within the heart of civil society.

The Right to the City and Civil Society Activism

The ambiguous positionality[1] of civil society agents in the neoliberal age makes it unclear what role such agents will take in the transformation of the city. That neoliberalism has become a ubiquitous driving force in global cities today, however, is not to suggest that civil society has been squelched—in fact, one can cogently argue that it is the opposite. The proliferation of community service organizations, tenant housing and homeownership associations and various other 501(c)3's makes it clear that a

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[1] 'Positionality' is a word with a precise meaning in political geography and the social sciences, referring, particularly, to where one is located within social structures (Rose, 1997).

vibrant third sector could in fact be *compatible* with free market ideology. The irony of this only recapitulates the importance of taking a correlation between democracy, egalitarianism, and civil society with much caution.

Related to this, and what has thus far been neglected here, is the importance of culture in the accentuation of the neoliberalization of civil society. Consider, for example, a constellation of ideals and traits typically associated with postmodernity: self-sufficiency, individualism, aestheticism, style, taste, creativity, and self-directed and career-minded "passion" (Harvey, 1990 Ehrenreich, 2005). To the extent that these characteristics of postmodernity, which are also typically regarded as *urban* characteristics, are in alignment with late capitalist consumerist habits and privatized access to material goods, culture too has a role in encouraging the formation of self-organized autonomous bodies that are at the core of civil society. In fact, it is a presumed 'democratic' culture that Tocqueville alluded to in his appraisal of U.S. civic associationalism. It is 'trust' and 'social capital' that serve as the markers for a self-organized civil society and the socialization of democratic norms (Putnam, 2007 Fukuyama, 2001). All of these notions, however, take self-sufficiency and autonomy as axiomatic and pre-eminent—a fact that neatly aligns with Nozick's emphasis on state non-interventionism and a process-based justice that disregards current conditionalities.

In many respects, interpreting these changes in ideology[2] and culture as the result of neoliberalism would be to argue that they are somehow superstructural (hence, derivative) to changes in the political economy. The question of the veracity of this interpretation will be left to the reader to decide, but what is relevant is the question of just how pervasive neoliberal ideology is—most especially with respect to the third sector. For instance, non-internally-democratic and insular NGOs with liabilities to investors have been largely criticized for stunting participatory democracy and substantive equalities, even while promoting formal political rights. Others have even charged NGOs as being "Trojan horses for global neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2005; Petras, 1999). Very few, however, would argue an extreme: it would certainly be misleading to think that all the world's nonprofits and NGOs are marionettes to a profits-driven neoliberal puppeteer. As noted earlier, the ascendancy of explicitly anti-neoliberal, anti-gentrification coalitions in the past decade showcases that the spirit of militant activism, while less expressively overt under current market-driven regimes, has not entirely vanished—true both within the United States and abroad (Petras, 1999). Efforts to dispel the deceptions of the neoliberal growth

[2] Here, I reference 'ideology' as Marxists have used it—as related to the notion of 'false consciousness'—and as Marx himself seemed to imply its use in *The German Ideology* (1845-6).

machine must thus directly confront the ideologies perpetuated by economic elites, what can otherwise be dubbed the instruments of consent-formation in Gramscian civil society. The new movements have led the way in this regard, for as previously noted, urban social justice movements like the Movement for Justice in El Barrio have creatively taken advantage of the products of capitalism (e.g. information technology) in a fashion that is reminiscent of Marx's prediction of the inevitable frictions between the relations and forces of production (see the preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, first published 1859). Revisionist Marxists have thus perceived ample evidence for continued use of (if modified) Marxist principles in the offensive against the current global economic order. For those who seek the sort of activist principles of self-organization and autonomy promoted within 'activist' civil society, the revanchism of 'take back the land' and 'right to the city' movements provides a powerful tool against the hegemony of Nozickean liberalism.

In a now-famous text written on the eve of the student and worker uprising of May 1968, *Le droit à la ville*, Lefebvre utilized Marxist principles to "outline what a specifically urban postbourgeois philosophy might be" (Mitchell, 2003). One of Lefebvre's most important arguments—that the city is an *ouvre*—is premised on the idea that the city is a construction within which all its inhabitants participate and, therefore, meriting of rights. The city, moreover, is necessarily the site of confrontations and exchanges between differences—a point alluded to over a half century earlier by Georg Simmel in counterposing the provincialism and homogeneity of the rural with the cosmopolitanism and heterogeneity of the urban modern (Simmel, 1903). Given the traditional Marxist interpretation of the modern city as the product of capitalist dynamism and accumulation imperatives, one can easily extrapolate how clashes of different interests may culminate into vigorous battles over property rights. That this is related to the history of neoliberal urbanism is made evident through the additional insight into how market interests increasingly determine the right of citizens *within* cities. According to Mitchell:

"[I]n the city, different people with different projects must necessarily struggle with one another over the shape of the city, the terms of access to the public realm, and even the rights of citizenship. Out of this struggle the city as a work—as an ouvre, as a collective if not singular project—emerges, and new modes of living, new modes of inhabiting, are invented.

But the problem with the bourgeois city, the city in which we really live, of course, is that this ouvre is alienated, and so not so much a site of participation as one of expropriation by a dominant class (and set of economic interests) that is not really interested in making the city a site for the cohabitation of differences.

More and more the spaces of the modern city are being produced for us rather than by us." (Mitchell 2003: 18).

The right to the city must thus be understood as entailing the right to "claim presence in the city" (McCann, 2002), the right to appropriate spaces, the right to housing, and the right to participate in processes of urban development. This relatively radical concept of 'rights' holds that self-determination is not expressed in the mere exercise of formal, political voting privileges. Instead, the right to the city is interpretatively a principle that corresponds with participatory democratic procedures, overlapping in its objectives with those of an urban, activist civil society. Additionally, what both the right to the city and civil society share is a valorization of egalitarian liberalism and public deliberation, as well as a demand for public spaces as forums for social interactions and exchanges. The emphasis ascribed by the right to the city to the specificities of space and local signage systems also provides necessary armament for the construction of viable, inclusionary resistance movements. Indeed, linkages between civil society discourse and rallies behind the right to the city foregrounding the materiality of space bear a potential to incorporate subaltern populations within a coherently organized opposition to neoliberal urbanism.

Given recent trends in the political economy of New York, revivification of the right to the city as a rallying cry should then come as no surprise. What is more subject to questioning is whether the ethos behind this insurgency is powerful enough, cohesive enough, or resilient enough to challenge the dual market-state apparatus of the new urbanism. The debate regarding whether a veritable anti-neoliberal New Left has emerged is still inconclusive, with many scholars still positing a fragmentation of the objectives and trajectories of the various movements only loosely connected within a multiplicity of global social networks. It would still be patently false, however, to suggest that little opposition has taken place. Today, new social justice networks and transnational advocacy groups said to be representatives of a still-developing global civil society are now connecting through such public outlets as the annual the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. A bottom-up pressure at the global level to hold NGOs accountable to their Third World constituents, criticism of austerity measures enacted by global financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and skepticism of human rights discourse more generally suggest that a revanchist opposition is unlikely to wane anytime soon. More importantly, however, is the deterioration of the façade of organicity promoted within the hegemonic regime of the neoliberal state. Relevant to the consciousness-raising tactics of activist community organizations is a resistance against the symbolic violence perpetuated against low income communities through the (North) American 'achievement ideology' (MacLeod, 1987) and other free trade myths, which are today

counteracted by a political education that opposes the TINA (there is no alternative) thesis of neoliberalism (Evans, 2008).

Of course, anti-gentrification resistance today has had significant institutional and logistical hurdles to overcome, not due in small part to the individualization of struggles induced by postmodernity. The political climate with respect to housing has changed considerably within the last half century. Public housing, for instance, has been a controversial subject matter throughout much of the 20th century in the United States, and towards the end of the Depression, when public housing legislation was first introduced, clashes between *laissez-faire* liberals and Keynesian egalitarians produced anti-socialist condemnations as it does today. When gentrification first became an issue to be opposed by organized collectivities within the city, during the 1970s and '80s, resistance was often mobilized early on and with certain degrees of success (Hackworth, 2007). Militant activism, at the very least, was able to bring gentrification debates into the public sphere. By the end of the 1980s, however, the abrupt changes brought about through the crisis regime and the corporatization of New York City government led to diminished support within a once firmly-entrenched Keynesian municipality. Widespread acceptance of the efficiency of the market continued to silence oppositional voices, and in time, many demoralized activists found themselves adapting to the socioeconomic transformations. Cities that refused to privatize were severely punished, and elected officials who were staunchly Keynesian were rebuked as being fiscally irresponsible. The end result—visible today—has been the marginalization of anti-gentrification groups within the urban public sphere (ibid).

Jason Hackworth (2007) describes the minimization of the public saliency of anti-gentrification groups as having driven the movement into two different directions. The first has been the already-familiar cooptation by the state resulting in less confrontational, and hence business-friendly, non-profits. Many of the groups that once agitated for more affordable housing became mainstreamed into community development corporations (CDCs), which Hackworth characterizes as "an important feature of the post-Keynesian city." As CDCs are dependent on the state for some, if not all, of their funding, many can be easily classified as the products of the neoliberalization of civil society. In one ten-year retrospective study published in the *New York Times* (Jacobs 1998), activists who were involved in the protests around Tompkins Square and East Village gentrification were either priced out of the neighborhood or obtained jobs lucrative enough to have "softened their stance" (Hackworth, 2007:132-3). The second trajectory for anti-gentrification activism, one whose politics mad it inassimilable within the neoliberal city, led to constant confrontations with City Hall. These groups, still largely in existence,

have had variable success rates as the state became more pro-active in shuttering them out of the public sphere. It is argued here, however, that a new resurgence of this more proactive (if not outright militant) activism within the last ten years—most especially within the domain of political education—has been gathering momentum and gaining strength as a formidable influence on city politics.

Final Remarks

"Nowhere has liberal philosophy failed so conspicuously as in its understanding of the problem of change. Fired by an emotional faith in spontaneity, the common-sense attitude toward change was discarded in favor of a mystical readiness to accept the social consequences of economic improvement, whatever they might be… It should need no elaboration that a process of undirected change, the pace of which is deemed so fast, should be slowed down, if possible, so as to safeguard the welfare of the community."

The Great Transformation (1944), Karl Polanyi

Describing the rise of economic liberalism and the market society in 19th century England, Polanyi may as well have been discussing the dawn of today's neoliberal era. Today, the notion of "emotional faith in spontaneity" that was rehearsed in the persuasive free market ideology of the last three and a half decades will have a sad resonance to those around the world confronted by the devastating consequences of our speculative financial system. As mentioned, it is the supposed 'naturalness' of the changes produced within, and by, our global economy—the argument through which gentrification is justified by free market liberals—that serves as one of the most potent instruments in the consolidation of consent and the demoralization of a fragmented populace that feeds into further disavowal and political retreat. The battle to stave off gentrification is thus imperiled by a public complacency and fear that will remain unmitigated through a continued atomization and suppression of a staunchly activist civil society.

Here, it has been argued that resistance cannot succeed without the de-construction of consent—what, in Bourdieuian terms, can be understood as the struggle for the reconfiguration of symbolic capital within social space (Bourdieu, 1989). The violence perpetuated by the symbolic power of neoliberal "world-making," believed here to be fundamentally linked to Gramsci's notion of consent as the machinery through which the state takes hostage civil society, is to be found in the paraded language of individualism and freedom. In the context of gentrification, the new urban colonization is

legitimated (and intelligently veiled) by the language of "urban renewal" and "community empowerment," giving rise to individual ambivalences and the fractioning of neighborhood solidarity. On the other hand, if the rise of global resistance movements is suggestive of anything, it is that the myth of "improvement" is not without its significant challengers. Civil society as constructed here bears a potential for a redirection of trends, for as Gramsci himself noted, civil society was a potential site of resistance—a site wherein political education could mount a cogent counter-offensive against the forces of social control fortified through state violence. Today's resistance within the neoliberal city must then privilege participation of the public as its guiding principle—a notion that corresponds with recent paradigmatic shifts to incorporating external accountability measures (Edwards & Hulme, 2002; Weisband & Ebrahim, 2007); enforcement of social norms (Kaldor, 2003b), and the evocation of rights discourse (Mitchell, 2003), particularly the right of urban inhabitants to participate in the restructuring of their city.

Furthermore, it has been suggested here that a more thorough connection between civil society discourse in the tradition of Gramsci and Michnik can be consolidated with the neo-Marxist credo of the right to the city. Both civil society advocates and neo-Marxist urbanists have participatory democracy and shared public responsibility at the core of their beliefs. Both share an invested interest in the acknowledgement of historical injustices and power differentials, and both seek recognition of the relevance of material inequalities as a necessary co-requisite to the exercise of formal political rights. While fundamental frictions between individual and collective freedoms persist within these schools of thought (something that is properly the subject of another essay), it is an undergirding tenet of substantive, individual autonomy within a social economy of just exchanges that unites the two discourses. Whereas the neo-Marxist urbanism implicit within the right to the city discourse re-articulates the materiality of space as a legitimate battleground for political resistance, civil society's emphasis on the genuine voicing of public demands adds another dimension for the realization of democratic rights. Anti-gentrification activists have thus much to withdraw from both strands of political thought.

In the end, however, further reflection on the union of these strands can lead to a return to more fundamental questions, one of which relates to the age-old sociological dialectic between agency and structure. For Georg Simmel (1903), the modern city was the site of tension between the human and her social environment, between the freedom *from* provincialism and homogeneity and the freedom to *be* unique, self-expressive, and autonomous. Freedom, Simmel noted, is never a state of

being but a *process*—a process Nietzsche and others have linked to the continual construction of meaning through existence. The agency-structure dialectic reinforces a notion of individual will within parameters of constraint and outside the conditions of our own choosing. Moreover, the right to the city makes clear that rights are never static, never absolute, but only exercised through continuous reappropriation and rehearsal of spatial practices. Civil society, too, is understood not merely as a descriptor but as a never-ending *aim*, and as such, it is in a prime position to actively fight for the preservation of citizen rights. Within the struggles for liberty that are at the heart of anti-gentrification movements, the tensions between agency and structure—between individual rights and collective needs—could hardly be any more palpable.

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