

INTRODUCTION

On the Town: The Culture of the Capital City

This introduction is written differently than it would have been a few months ago. As I write, we are living through events that must necessarily have an influence on our conceptions of the city. Our experience of the city is now refracted through the lens of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and the war that has followed. I find, for example, that I do not look at skyscrapers the same way now; buildings that once seemed massive and solid, the artificial equivalent of mountains, now seem fragile. It is impossible to think of the city right now without some conception of terror, linked to images of the collapse of the World Trade Centre and of the bombing of Kabul in Afghanistan. The title of this volume mentions "urban pleasures", but recent events remind us that these must always be understood in relation to urban dangers.

Cities frame the cultural lives of much of the world's population at the beginning of the twenty first century. Even people who do not live in urban centres are often influenced by cultural conceptions of urban life. Cities are crucial points of concentration for social, economic and political power. They are also the central production points for the burgeoning cultural industries that help shape our imaginations, including television, music, film, fashion and publishing.

Specific cities define the cultural meanings of urbanity at particular historical moments. Walter Benjamin, in his article "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", argued that the French capital served as an important reference point, though he did not specify the geographic scope of its influence.¹ Benjamin traced out the development of specific cultural forms in Paris that began to frame the dreams and longings of the population. He related these cultural formations to a specific history of struggle, from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune, and to a particular experience of capitalist development.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken 1978).

I am going to use Benjamin's essay as a model for a brief reflection on the cultural significance of New York City in the second half of the twentieth century. I believe this perspective can provide us with some tools for making sense of current events. It will also open up some of the themes that are explored in more detail in the subsequent chapters of this volume.

"New York, New York, It's a Helluva Town"

In 1944, the musical *On the Town* written by Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, premiered in New York City. The musical presents New York City through the eyes of three sailors who have twenty four hours of shore leave in the big city. The musical is "redolent of a crowded, anxious, every-moment-matters wartime New York."² It offers its audience a tour of the sites, sounds and feelings of the city, expressed both in the words of the songs and the music of Bernstein's dance numbers. More than anything, the musical describes an enchantment, a magical urban space of energy, desire and consumption haunted always by the spectre of death as the sailors must return to war.

On the Town describes a New York that was just emerging as a world city. The years immediately following the end of World War Two saw New York emerge as a kind of world capital, at least in the sense of being the headquarters of the United Nations. It was also a 'capital' city in the sense of being a financial centre for massive transnational corporations accumulating on a world scale. At the same time, the city was a centre of cultural production in such fields as: architecture, comic books, commentary, drama, fashion, jazz, musical theatre, poetry, popular music, shopping, television and visual art.

Yet the New York of *On The Town* is charmingly unpretentious. The sailors are clearly ordinary guys, and the great beauty they are chasing is Miss Turnstiles, the monthly beauty queen of the subway system: "She's got to be beautiful, she's got to be just an average girl and most important of all, she's got to ride the subway."³ This was an important part of the mix that made the New York City of the 1940s. The magic of the physical place, the skyscrapers and the lights of Times Square, combined with a particular kind of democratic ethos that came not from above but from below.

New York emerged as a cultural centre at the moment of the phenomenon that Michael Denning describes as the "labouring of American

² See Ethan Morden "On The Town: Notes" in *On the Town* (Compact Disc) by Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden and Adolph Green (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon 1993).

³ Leonard Bernstein et al, *On The Town*, Track 3.

culture."⁴ The 1930s and 1940s saw an important wave of organizing among American workers that produced the mass, industrial unions of the C.I.O. (Congress of Industrial Organizations) and new forms of political and social consciousness. Denning argues that American culture was transformed by this wave of organizing as working class people emerged in new ways as the consumers and producers of cultural goods.

Workers fought their way into the market, winning wage increases and changes in working conditions that permitted new kinds of consumption and leisure. The realm of popular culture was expanded and transformed by the augmented purchasing power and changed expectations of the working class. Artists, writers, performers and intellectuals from working class backgrounds were drawn into this ex-panded realm of popular culture, reflecting the particular consciousness of the milieu from which they emerged in their work.⁵ New York City was an epicentre of the labouring of American culture; it was a centre for politicized and militant activism, with a very high level of working class organization.⁶ It was also a crucial centre for cultural production. Joshua Freeman argued that the combination of this militancy with the cultural significance of the city meant that, "The sensibility of New York workers—savvy, opinionated, democratic—helped set the tone of the nation in the postwar years."⁷

One of the significant features of the "sensibility of New York workers" was its multi-culturalism. New York in the period of the labouring of American culture was home to the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of African-American cultural expression.⁸ It was a city largely populated by immigrants and their children, including concentrations from Italian, Jewish, German, and Irish background.⁹ The labouring of American culture thus combined elements of a democratic ethos related to a particular moment in the development of working class consciousness with a kind of cosmopolitanism.¹⁰

This specific history of class formation and struggle was actually crucial to the allure of New York City. Walter Benjamin discussed the ways a

⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso 1996).

⁵ See Denning, *The Cultural Front* and George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labour and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois 1994).

⁶ Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press 2000), 1-7, 24-25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ See Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance : hub of African-American culture, 1920- 1930* (New York : Pantheon Books,1995).

⁹ Freeman, *Working Class New York*, 25.

¹⁰ See Denning *The Cultural Front* for a rich discussion of this combination.

certain utopianism was woven in to the fabric of Paris, framing a particular kind of dream world that inflected city life with a certain magic.¹¹ New York in the 1940s had a similar utopian dimension. *On the Town* gives us a glimpse of New York as a fleeting twenty-four hour utopia of city lights, famous sights, desire, community and consumption. Anatole Broyard, in his memoir of post-War Greenwich Village, described his project of opening up a bookstore in New York as "one of the persistent romances, like living off the land or sailing around the world."¹²

The cultural power of New York depended in part on this capacity to offer people a glimpse of a better world. This utopianism mapped together the real struggles of New York workers to improve this world with the dream world of the capitalist marketplace. The market's dream-inducing capacity is rooted in the ways that everyday objects seem to take on extraordinary powers when they meet each other on the market. These objects, produced by people through various work processes, seem to stand up and turn the tables on their producers, suddenly taking charge of the transaction between them. Commodities, things produced for the market, seem to actively negotiate the conditions of exchange amongst themselves and then dictate terms to their human makers, who are cast in the passive role. Thus things appear to take on the best of human creative capacities when they leave the grasp of their immediate producers and enter into the sphere of market exchange.¹³

Shopping is thus much more than an instrumental process of hunting down and purchasing required goods. It is imbued with a certain magic, as people seek to recapture for themselves the enchanting human qualities that commodities assume through market processes. Indeed, the activity of shopping becomes more important than the actual goods purchased, which inevitably disappoint us when they are removed from the mystified realm of the market and taken home for our consumption. Somehow the clothes I purchase never do make me look like a movie star.

The allure of New York was in large part the charm of the capital city of shopping. In *On the Town*, the sailor Ozzie described his response to a sale: "My sense of what is practical begins to fail/ I buy one, then another/ Another, then another/ I buy the whole store out and I'm in business for myself."¹⁴ New York throbbed with the seductions of goods for sale. The

¹¹ See Benjamin, *Paris*, 148, 162.

¹² Anatole Broyard *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Vintage 1993), 28.

¹³ One of Benjamin's great contributions was to build on Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism to explore the particular dream-inducing capacity of the capitalist market. See Benjamin, *Paris*, 151 and Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage 1977), 163-177.

¹⁴ Bernstein et al, *On the Town*, track 6.

1947 film *Miracle on 34th Street* might be seen as a tribute to the magical qualities of Christmas shopping in New York City.

The great symbols of New York, the skyline, the lights of Broadway, the Statue of Liberty, the stores, thus acquired an allure that combined a certain democratic ethos with the seductions of the market place. After World War 2, however, the balance in this complex and con-tradictory utopianism shifted dramatically. The subversive and democratic content was sharply downgraded with the rise of the Cold War, the anti-communist witch-hunt of McCarthyism, that included a major purge of the cultural industries, and the demobilization of the workers movement (whose radicalism was always limited in any case).¹⁵ It is the commercial side of New York's complex utopianism that largely shaped the image of the city in the second half of the twentieth century, though the subversive and democratic dimensions could not be completely eliminated.

New York at the end of the twentieth century was a cultural hub whose power derived from a jumble of contradictory images. This was the city of money at its most naked, the capital of capital where the market ruled, whether in the guise of the Stock Exchange, the shops of Fifth Avenue or the theatres of Broadway. It was a city of blunt polarization, where poverty and wealth were in close proximity; where a multi-cultural cosmopolitanism vied with rampant segregationism and racism; where certain aspirations to a kind of internationalism contended with America's brutal record as a superpower. It was also a city with an important history of labour, anti-racist, feminist, lesbian and gay and global justice movements, which helped make it the place that it was. This was a place that could power dreams and haunt nightmares.

September 11, 2001 added new elements to this complex picture. Yet it is important to remember that in some ways these elements were not so new. One of the features of urban life since the 1930s has been the horror of aerial bombardment and the mass destruction of the civilian population. Picasso captured this most haunting feature of modern urban life in his famous painting "Guernica", which was housed in New York at the Museum of Modern Art until democracy was restored in Spain.¹⁶

The destruction of the World Trade Centre was New York's (and continental North America's) first experience of this kind of terror from the air. Post-war New York emerged as a centre at a time when many of the great cities of Europe and Japan were devastated by bombardment. Many cities have been bombed since then, often by Americans; the cities of Afghanistan are being bombed as I write. If we do not feel the pain caused

¹⁵This history is traced out in Freeman, *Working Class New York* and Denning *The Cultural Front*.

¹⁶ Frank D Russell, *Picasso's Guernica : The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 1-7, 101-112.

by some of those bombings the way we do the destruction of the World Trade Centre, it tells us something about the power of ethnocentrism in our understanding of human suffering. It also tells us something about the symbolic power of New York City.

Urban Pleasures and Dangers

It seems to me it would be premature to try to draw any definitive conclusions here about the impact of September 11 on the cultural capital of New York City. This introduction is intended only to stimulate a bit of reflection. It also highlights a central theme in the papers included in this volume: the inseparability of urban pleasures and dangers. The complex mixture of pleasure and danger is one of the factors that conditions our experience of urban life. This mixture emerges out of the physical spaces of the city as well as its social relations, combining as they do communality, individualism, collectivity and inequality in diverse forms of consumption, production and play. The papers included in this volume trace out the relations of pleasure and danger in the cultural construction of particular kinds of urban space.

Peter Baldwin discusses the character of the urban night and the regulation of children's nocturnal activities. Of course, night is not a uniquely urban phenomenon, but it is experienced in a particular way in urban settings. The night streets are places of pleasure and danger. This chapter discusses the night streets of the early twentieth century North American city as places of sexuality, drinking and crime where pleasure was relatively unregulated. Social reformers understood these night streets as a particular threat to children, who were seen as impressionable and likely to be lead astray by the allure and dangers of the night. Children were on these streets, including those who worked there, such as "newsies" selling papers. This chapter traces out reformers' attempts to introduce forms of moral regulation that would either keep children off the streets or control those who were on them.

David Higgs explores the new visibility of the "gay city" with the rise of a lesbian and gay movement after 1969. City life created new possibilities for the exploration of sexual pleasure that those in authority tended to see as dangerous. Urban centres have been the key site for the development of lesbian and gay existence. There have been many forms of homosexuality through history and a variety of societal responses. It is primarily in the city that we have seen the emergence and consolidation of lesbian and gay identities linked to particular sexualities and lifestyles. Yet much of this process took place under conditions of invisibility resulting from clandestine existence and official repression. One of the important tasks that has accompanied the rise of a lesbian and gay movement has been the recovery of the hidden history of the "gay city". This chapter analyses some of the key themes emerging out of this work of historical recovery.

Barrie Ratcliffe examines the photographic record of a working class section of Paris that was destroyed through "urban renewal" in the 1850s and 1860s. The photographer Charles Marville focussed his work on the reconstruction of Paris, documenting both the neighbourhoods that would be torn down and the new urban forms that were developed. This chapter moves from the analysis of the photographic images of a working class neighbourhood through to an investigation of who lived there and how they lived. The analysis of photographic images raises important questions about the process of taking these pictures, focussing on the motivation and aesthetic choices of the photographer. This photographic representation sets the stages for an archival investigation to uncover information about the people who lived and worked in these areas. The 'slum' then ceases to be an abstract image of privation and becomes instead a place where people made lives for themselves, negotiating pleasures and dangers.

These papers finally remind us that our understanding of city life is always framed by the perspective of the observer. One person's pleasure can be another's danger. Social reformers saw the urban night as a danger to children as a result of a particular view of the city and its problems rooted in a particular project for social change. The rise of a lesbian and gay movement has rendered visible the lesbian and gay life of cities that was previously invisible to many observers, or known only as a danger to be eliminated. The photographer Charles Marville took pictures of particular working class neighbourhoods slated for demolition, and these images were inflected with his own aesthetic and social agenda.

The perspective of the observer is located in time and place, enmeshed in social and historical relations that are often taken for granted. Yet at certain moments of flux these relations become more visible as they are renegotiated. Urban 'renewal' forces examination of the meanings of the 'slum'. Lesbian and gay activism have opened up new discussions of sexual pleasures and dangers. The setting of the sun every night casts a different light on the experience of city streets. The destruction of the World Trade Centre and the subsequent bombing of the cities of Afghanistan necessarily cast a different light on the dreams and nightmares of urban life.

Alan Sears
Sociology and Anthropology
University of Windsor