

What Happens Next – Sunday April 25, 2021

Reinventing Business, Liberty and Rights, Sex and Drugs in NYC, Xerox PARC and Bell Labs Terry Williams

Larry Bernstein:

We're going to go on to our next speaker. That's Terry Williams. Terry is a professor of sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He is the author of *Le Boogie Woogie: Inside an After-Hours Club*, and he will be discussing sex and drugs. Go ahead Terry.

Terry Williams:

Come with me. I want to take you to this place I found in Harlem. Do you hear that knock? It's a special knock. Only those in the know will understand its meaning. Without that knock, you would not get in. Two guards won't say anything to you, just nod and follow me down this long hall. Gambling in the back, drinks at the bar, topless dancing in an hour. You hear that music? That's boogie-woogie. Go through those hanging beads and don't bump your head. To the left is the bar. They're all sniffers there. Yes, that's cocaine they're sniffing. They called it blow. That's the owner, Frenchie, standing over there, but as you watch him, listen to me tell you what this place is all about. *Le Boogie Woogie* was a place of continuous emotional release and discovery through drug use, fostering a collective sense of being.

The drug use, the conversations, the sex play, the competition between the girls, each trying at times to outperform the other for tips and attention. Whatever took place in this club was an alternative to life as many people knew it. Drug use, for example, was complicated. People were high, in a way different from an alcohol induced high, they were stimulated, talkative, nervous, paranoid, sexually excitable and thirsty. The bar maid role was complicated too. She had to take on the crowd and deal with the bartender, and all the hullabaloo going on around her. She had to take orders while the jukebox was blasting with the crowd pulling at her coattails, with men and women feeling her ass. The guy who just gave her a hundred dollar bill was now locked on and whatever he wanted, he got including a body bump and a rub when he got past her.

In this after-hours world, cocaine was an essential element in the quest to stay cool. The after-hours world also regulated its use, even though my research is descriptive and might best be described as a micro ethnography based on personal observations. I made analytical sense of this social world as it existed within the ecological and cultural networks of the city. In other words, this narrative is a theory of how a particular human group makes sense of their world. I continuously asked, what does it all mean? By providing a description of what goes on in the club, I also try to uncover the importance and the meaning of relations, and how those relations are framed and maintained by unwritten rules of established order within the club.

Le Boogie Woogie is an example of what it means to be part of a subculture. A subculture that no longer exists as it once did. In *Le Boogie Woogie*, the cocaine club's primary group bond was

the intimacy among patrons. It was a sharing, touching, a nose to nose relationship where everyone was breaking the law together.

Now, let's go to the Soft City. The Soft City, for business and pleasure in New York, focuses on people who openly and freely experiment with their sexuality. Some might see this as urban degradation, but I see it as that extreme moment when the city awakes the imprint of an identity for good, bad, or indifferent. I see it as that rare moment that invites the voyeur, the stranger, the visitor, the resident, the other to come in and play and be molded by it, when the city goes soft. In the soft part of the city, once you decided who you are, the city would assume a fixed form around you. The Soft City is the place of sex shops and body houses, hotels of assignation, sex worker strolls, gay spots, hip bars, after-hours clubs, burlesque joints, peep shows, and \$5 sex emporiums. The Soft City is a journey of discovery and exploration into a perverse space.