

What Happens Next – Sunday May 9, 2021

Stupidity of War, Inflation, Brooklyn, Cultivating Influence, & Bottle Service

Kay Hymowitz

Larry Bernstein:

We're going to go onto our next speaker Kay Hymowitz. Kay joins us from the Manhattan Institute. She has recently written a new book called *The New Brooklyn: What It Takes to Bring a City Back*. Kay, take us to the borough of Brooklyn.

Kay Hymowitz:

My husband and I, we're both baby boomers raised in comfortable suburbs, but in 1982, we bought a brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Our families and childhood friends thought we were crazy. At the time, the neighborhood was mostly Italian, Irish, and Puerto Rican working class, people who had once worked in nearby factories or the borough's historical Navy yard. Many of those factories and the Navy yard itself were already closed by the time we got to the area. Park Slope was looking seedy, many of the appealing brownstones had been turned into boarding houses and SROs, crime was a problem too. You only had to look at the number of houses with wrought-iron bars on the lower floor windows to see that.

We were gentrifiers, though no one knew the term at the time. The area was attracting a steady stream of gentrifiers, that is, college educated men and women, most but not all of them white. Within 15 years, the stream had turned into such a torrent that the newcomers were spreading beyond the borough's brownstone neighborhoods, in decayed industrial areas along the East River, like Williamsburg and Greenpoint. They came because they liked the lively and walkable streets, the sense of history and culture. They came most of all, though, because as the capital, the growing knowledge economy, New York City was where the high paying and cool jobs were. That's where they could find the jobs in finance, law, management, media, and arts they had been educated for. Some years later, they joined an exploding design and technology sector.

Kay Hymowitz:

Well-traveled and cosmopolitan, gentrifiers' tastes for ethnic food, cocktails, micro beers, coffee, music, and galleries, with adding new jobs, formed the deli and dive bar filled working class workers. By the early years of the new millennium, Brooklyn had become one of the coolest brands on the planet. You could find Brooklyn T-shirts, baseball caps, cafes, and cocktail bars everywhere from Tokyo, to Amsterdam, to Sydney.

So, as many of you probably know, a lot of Brooklyn natives and, ironically, many of the newcomers themselves loathed gentrification. Even though, early on, real estate developers had anticipated Brooklyn's boom and built condos and renovated factories and warehouses to house the new arrivals, they couldn't keep up with demand. Rents were skyrocketing and so were skylines. Despite New York's uniquely extensive public housing, rent control, and stabilization policies, lower income folks couldn't move into once affordable and familiar

neighborhoods. Those who remained were resentful when the diners and laundromats turned into \$5 coffee shops and sushi bars.

As gentrifiers moved into neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Fort Greene with a long black history, gentrification paint became a racial flashpoint. White gentrifiers were described as imperialists destroying native culture and people. Social scientists studying the trends were unable to find much evidence that locals were being forced out of their homes in significant numbers. Moreover, racial polarization prevented people from seeing how much a new wave of immigrants from China, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, and elsewhere were adding to housing pressures and also changing Brooklyn's identity. It may not be entirely comfortable to point out, but immigrant Brooklyn turned out to be symbiotic with gentrified Brooklyn. Many low skilled immigrants made a living servicing the gentrifiers, in restaurant kitchens, as babysitters, building contractors, and the like.

So what does COVID mean for what I call in my book's title The New Brooklyn? The big question is whether New York City, where about one in five people are below the poverty line, will be able to hold on to a mobile, middle, and upper middle class. I'm watching two areas of concern among others, crime and education, and the picture for crime at this moment is not particularly encouraging. Shootings spiked 97% in 2020, over 2019, and they're up 83.3% from 2019 for the first four months of 2021. These numbers are still nothing like the worst of times in the 1970s, but they are concerning.

Park Slope and other gentrified neighborhoods remain largely free of violent crime, but people who moved there in the past 15 years are used to not worrying much about muggings, break-ins, or stolen car parts. That appears to be changing. Park Slope is also a very progressive neighborhood, and residents have become highly suspicious of police. I don't see a particularly good outcome there.

Regarding education, despite a miserable overall record, New York City schools have had some bright spots over the past decades. There are some very successful charters, some rigorous neighborhood schools here and there, and for those who get in, our famous exam high schools. The city's middle class uses these outlets in an otherwise bleak system, but racial tension makes the future of these alternatives, as well as the future of gifted and talented programs, very uncertain. The political establishment talks increasingly about anti-racism and desegregation as the solution, but I think they seem to forget that only 15% of New York City public school children are white.

I fear a toxic feedback loop as the middle class leaves New York. Their taxes foregone, the city will have less tax revenue, resulting in dirtier streets and parks, larger school classes, more crime and disorder, all of which will lead more people, who can do so, to leave for greener pastures. The exodus may just gain momentum and so will the problems, and then we're back to the 1970s.

Let me just end with this one little comment. Many New Yorkers complained about gentrification, but they should be careful what they wish for.