

# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TOMPKINS SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD REVOLT

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The Tompkins Square Park Neighborhood Revolt, and I am calling it that only because I have to call it something, occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I will not put an exact date upon the beginning of the Revolt because, in a sense, the rebellion began when the first bohemian artist set foot in downtown Manhattan, many decades ago, and because in another sense, the Revolt still goes on as long there are people like myself and others who dwell in the neighborhood, writing articles for publications like *The Shadow*, analyzing the urban malaise which reigns in New York City. But names and dates aside, it did happen. It was a rebellion, leading in some cases to exchanges of blows between citizens of New York City and the police, a rebellion akin to Shay's Revolt and the Whiskey Rebellion of early U.S. history and, more directly to the political antics of the Yippies and SDS in the sixties and seventies, with which many of us identified. The Revolt was local and relied on spontaneity, word of mouth, and gatherings of people in the public square, namely Tompkins Square Park, and these are the things that were both the beauty and the downfall of the Revolt.

This eminently American revolt was about nothing more than American democracy, even though all of us had a huge contempt for patriotism as it had been force fed to us in America's schools and spoon fed by the media. You see, two very undemocratic things were happening in American society-among the myriad of other undemocratic things that were also happening-which affected the counterculture community in the Lower East Side of Manhattan very deeply, more so than it did other categories of people. One was the conscious decision of government officials at all levels to pursue policies of gentrification, intended to make cities run more like businesses in the age of Reaganite pro-business policies. The key feature of gentrification was a dramatic increase in the amount of money that people would have to pay for living space and working space, which had remained relatively reasonable in the Lower East Side ever since the Great Depression and the liberal administration of Fiorello H. LaGuardia, who had maintained fairly strict pro-tenant policies of rent regulation (even as he sold out certain other parts of the city for complete demolition). Gentrification had a human face, albeit a not too pretty one, in that of Mayor Edward I. Koch. Earlier in his career Koch had been regarded as an extreme liberal, but in line with the new order put in place by the Reagan Revolution, he eagerly took up the task of making New York's down-at-the-heels neighborhoods pay for themselves by means of a fearsome raise-the-rent policy. Apartments that rented for 150 dollars

a month in 1977 (when Koch was elected mayor) were renting for seven hundred a month by 1983, two years into the Reagan administration. The "liberal" city and state authorities authorized a bevy of loopholes in rent laws: co-op conversions, major capital improvements, and vacancy increases, which enabled landlords to charge astronomical rents that the people who already lived in the neighborhood could simply not afford.

Gentrification went hand in hand with other policies of the City and State authorities such as catering to the industries of Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (F.I.R.E.--to remind us of the great wave of landlord arson that the Lower East Side suffered during the Koch administration) at the expense of other branches of the economy. Manufacturing and transport, unable to make the kind of efficient use of real estate that the new order demanded, were left to wither, unable to pay for needed space. Yuppies poured in and filled the apartments that the neighborhood folk, be they Puerto Rican, Slavic, Jewish, beatnik, hippie, punk, or conceptual artist, had been priced out of. In the bohemian/ethnic vs. yuppie/mainstream dichotomy, one can see the central conflict of our story. The word "yuppie" would play a prominent part in the discourse of the Tompkins Square Neighborhood Revolt because we perceived the young upper middle class and rich boys and girls moving into the neighborhood in an adversarial manner. Many of us had been through co-op conversions in which groups of yuppies bought into a building and put the apartments up for sale at prices that we could never hope to come up with, and in which the threat of eviction and displacement from the neighborhood was ever present. Developers would hire private detectives to spy on tenants and rent apartments to drug-addicted thugs to drive out the old residents of buildings. Gentrification was also accompanied by a great deal of landlord arson, which not only allowed building owners to collect large insurance payments but enabled them to sell the fire-damaged buildings vacant to developers for gut renovation and rental at astronomical rates.

The Tompkins Square Revolt was also a revolt against the first inklings of the police regime that was to come to maturity under Rudolph Giuliani a few years later, but which was first tried out under Koch. Ed Koch was among the first U.S. politicians to start using the term Quality of Life to describe a focus upon the prosecution and punishment of petty violations such as public drinking and pot smoking. Certain ideologues had been pushing the Quality of Life slogan as a means of selling to urban liberals some of the objectives of the Reaganite culture wars--including a crackdown on drugs, pornography, prostitution, and slackerly behavior such as hanging out on the street. While conservatives had long wanted the cops to start busting the perverts, druggies, and bums, the liberals, being slicker people, needed a slicker justification. According to the Quality of Lifers, punishing those who violate certain rules of middle-class appropriateness helps improve the Quality of Life of the community by letting the decent people reclaim public spaces, and makes it a better place for mothers and children. Quality of Life-ism is a form of fascism with a human face. There are indeed "feminist"

Quality of Life ideologues who claim that any venues that attract primarily men, in particular prostitution and porno zones and areas with lots of bars, are bad for society and need to be shut down, or as in the case of old Times Square, torn down and replaced with a gentrified "family venue." Koch's Quality of Life crusade was inseparably bound up with his desire to gentrify Manhattan, and was little applied to other boroughs. His stated desire was to bring more well-to-do people into the city and thereby raise the price paid for real estate, and he could not do this in a place where the poor, vulgar slobs ruled the streets and made noise.

One of the first inklings of Koch's new Quality of Life regime was the crackdown on pot smoking, initiated in 1982 in Washington Square Park, an old gathering spot for Lower Manhattan nonconformists located in Greenwich Village. A midnight curfew was imposed upon Washington Square Park in 1987 with the support of Koch and local Democratic politicians. Tompkins Square Park on the other hand remained relatively free of this regime through the end of the eighties, and remained a haven for bohemian freaks, ranging from artists to drug addicts, and especially for homeless Lower East Side people who were priced out of housing during the big real estate shakeouts of the early eighties. Falling somewhat into both categories were the squatters, who had taken over endless rows of abandoned buildings just east of the park, for whom the park was a collective backyard. The freaks, squatters, and homeless mingled with neighborhood people around the Tompkins Square Park bandshell at political events in defense of the Sandinistas of Nicaragua and at punk concerts put on by squatter impresarios.

This is really where our part of the story begins. In 1988, people who might best be described as Quality of Lifers organized some of the people living in the blocks around Tompkins Square Park into an association to demand that a curfew be placed on Tompkins Square Park, thereby putting an end to the noise that emanated from the park at night. Officials of the Koch administration backed them and, in July of that year, the police began driving around the park at midnight shouting over their PA system that the park was closed, and that everyone had to leave. Apparently, the City bureaucrats were not aware that it was only a small, vocal group of people who actually wanted the park closed at night, and that a much larger group of people were outraged about the curfew, immediately identifying it with the hated gentrification policies of the Koch administration. The squatters, some of whom were highly politicized, took the initiative of putting out flyers encouraging people to violate the curfew, and then organized concerts at the bandshell that brought the atomized counterculture together around this issue where gentrification and the police state converged. I was not present at the Tompkins Square police riot of 1988, having returned from Europe the day after it happened, and will leave the details to Clayton Patterson and others who risked serious injury to document that event. In a nutshell, on July 31, 1988, an anti-curfew rally and concert took place in the park where there was a minor skirmish with cops. Over the next week, a massive campaign took

place via wheat pasting (that sticky precursor to e-mail) to announce a rally for Saturday night, August 6, 1988. A vastly larger number of people showed up for the rally than the police imagined, and the cops could do nothing as some seven hundred people assembled in the interior of the park. Convinced that members of the crowd intended to resist the curfew, police prepared for retaking the park by setting up their command center inside the park near the bandshell. But as curfew time approached, the throng unexpectedly exited the park onto Avenue A, separating the police who were supposed to hold the crowd in check from the brain trust that was supposed to command them. This threw the cops into confusion, and, adding to it all, one of the top commanders, Inspector Darcy, drove back to the station house at this point to use the toilet, leaving the inexperienced Captain McNamara to look after the situation. In the absence of better instructions, cops started pushing and shoving demonstrators on the avenue, some of whom pushed and shoved back, and bottles were thrown from the crowd. A confusing "10-85 Tompkins Square Park forthwith" command was issued to police cars all over Manhattan and Brooklyn, and hundreds of cops flooded the area, with no central leader and no orders. Demonstrators surged through the streets and cops began beating up demonstrators, people who looked like demonstrators, and people who were accidentally in the vicinity of demonstrators, including residents trying to flee into their houses. It was not until early the next morning that Koch administration officials realized the travesty that was going on, withdrew the police, and lifted the park curfew, both on Tompkins Square Park and Washington Square Park.

At this time the City's real estate values were faltering under the influence of the stock market crash of 1987. Ed Koch was in a tailspin; even his health was suffering, as he was reported to be having a series of mini-strokes. Koch was on his way out and it was only poetic justice that he should be humiliated by a ragtag band of radicals representing those most directly threatened by his gentrification and quality of life policies. All at once, a political movement had been forged in the Lower East Side that included a diverse group of people who had little else in common but that they felt targeted by the lofty plans of Koch and the gentrifiers.

The Tompkins Square movement was composed, as described in the Village Voice shortly after the riot, of "kitchen table cabals" and groups of people worked on their own projects which all tended to serve the common objective of getting people to assemble at events, in Tompkins Square Park and elsewhere, that reached critical mass and showed that there was opposition to gentrification in the city. The agitation would culminate in the big events in Tompkins Square Park, the concert every Memorial Day, Squatter Mayday, and innumerable smaller demonstrations and rallies. If you want to understand the Tompkins Square political movement, do not think of the Communist Party or any kind of military or guerilla movement. The Tompkins Square movement was a kind of bohemia cum political movement that embraced loud music and mind-altering substances, and considered these things elements, or perhaps better stated,

sacraments, of political resistance. While we were not a party in the sense of the Communist Party, one of our objectives was to organize "parties" in the other, more fun sense of the word, that would reach a sufficiently critical mass of determined people to discourage the cops from breaking them up. The marijuana smoke-ins, held in Washington Square Park at the time that the Tompkins Square movement was in full swing, were our events as much as any of the countless political rallies that we sponsored in Tompkins Square Park. The people who frequented these events were the movement, period-nobody needed a membership card and nobody needed to do anything that they didn't want to.

In summary, then, the Tompkins Square Activists were radical, as opposed to liberal, and were riled by two main issues: (1) Gentrification, which we fought in part by supporting the right of squatters to reclaim abandoned buildings as housing and by highlighting the homeless problem through supporting and comforting our homeless fellow citizens; (2) No Police State, a political slogan opposing park curfews, quality of life crusades, anti-homeless sweeps, and other aspects of the embryonic Giuliani mentality that was gestating in the years before Giuliani.

Aside from that, there was little other structured political ideology. Many of the Tompkins Square Activists wore other political labels like anarchist or communist, or even liberal in some cases, although their association with us caused them to be ostracized by the mainstream liberals. We were vilified by some communist groups, such as the pro-Soviet Workers World Party, even as others, such as the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party or RCP, participated in our events and were even accepted as hard-core Tompkins Square activists. The term Tompkins Square Anarchists was also used to describe us, and the name was never totally inappropriate because we did include a large contingent of politically aware anarchists, and our No Police State slogan was a classical anarchist battle cry with which even the most anti-intellectual drunk punk could identify. The anarchist label was also justified by the fact that two anarchist organizing centers--the Anarchist Switchboard on 9th St. between 1st and 2nd, which was also a kind of flophouse, and later, Sabotage Books, on St. Mark's Place between 1st Avenue and the park, were the closest things to "headquarters" that the Tompkins Square Activists had. Activists or anarchists, however, we could work together, and the tight cohesion and sense of camaraderie that held together big groups of us in confrontation with the police was our greatest strength. The movement relied on spontaneity, with all its assets and liabilities. We used to tell each other "the cops are our best organizers," because we were at our best, our noblest when we were defending ourselves against some kind of police attack. The problem with spontaneity, however, is that your adversaries are always trying to figure out your patterns and eventually they will have your number.

Even with all of its faults, however, the Tompkins Square movement was justified and righteous. The only thing for which I condemn myself and the people whom I

worked and played with, day and night, from 1988 through 1991, is for failing to make the changes that we believed in happen. It is because we did not form a viable political alternative to Giuliani-ism and gentrification that these evils have prospered, and New York's creativity and freedom are threatened with extinction. But the very fact that anyone resisted at all, just like the fact that some of us continue to resist, each in our own way, is what redeems this city and has stopped things from becoming as bad as they could be.

