

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2021

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

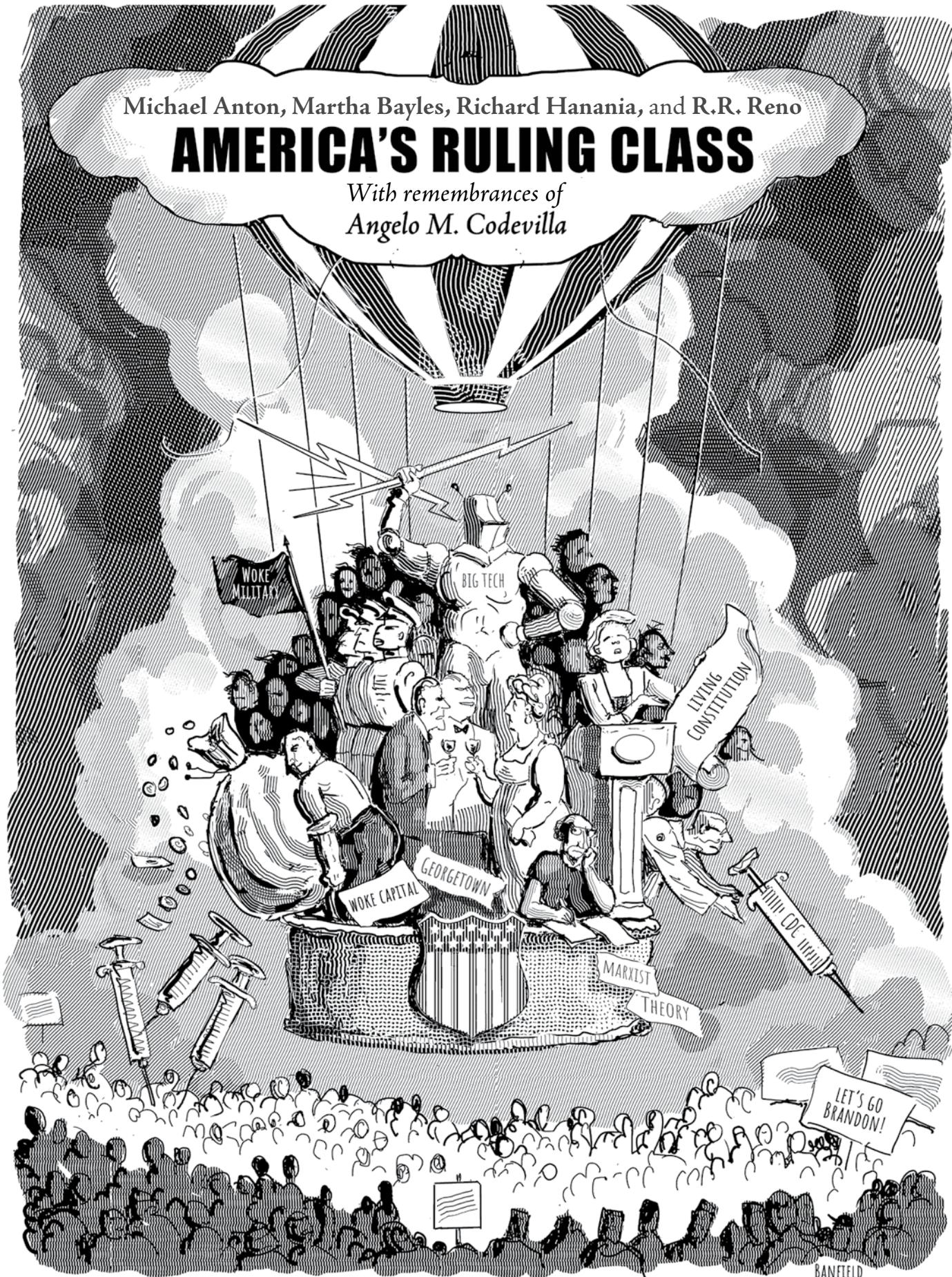
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Book Review by Myron Magnet

## MANHATTAN ON THE ROCKS

*New York, New York, New York: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation*, by Thomas Dyja.  
Simon & Schuster, 544 pages, \$30



**W**HAM! BAM!! POW!!! SHOUTS THOMAS Dyja's New Journalism-fueled prose, which, while it can't touch Tom Wolfe's torrential inventiveness, nevertheless grips the reader's interest in this fast-paced history of New York City from near death to rebirth, and from mayors Abe Beame to Mike Bloomberg. Yet the story *New York, New York, New York: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation* tells is a con, a high-octane effort to persuade you that what happened in Gotham from 1978 until now was exactly the opposite of what really did happen—and that one of the most breathtaking, instructive, and well-documented social policy success stories in recent history occurred for reasons no one understands, on the watch of a nasty leader who deserves no credit for heroically resuscitating America's metropolis.

Let's give Dyja—whose last book was the award-winning profile *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (2013)—the credit he's due. When his writing is firing on all cylinders, it gives a smooth ride. Take this vignette of Mrs. Astor planning a dinner for president-elect Ronald Reagan:

Brooke Astor had quite the quandary. Tap tapping a pencil on her desk in the Money Room, she mulled the list. The Kissingers, of course. The Wristons and the Rohatyns. But some would *have* to go; sixty was such a small number in a city made of so *many* fascinating people.

That the "Money Room," adorned with "ten coats of lacquered red paint, and some Canalettos," bears its name because it's where she's giving her husband's fortune to charity—"130

million so far"—is a touch that supercharges an already high-horsepower paragraph.

**M**ORE IMPORTANT IS DYJA'S INSIGHTFUL portrait of Mayor Edward Koch and his three-term administration. When Koch took office on New Year's Day 1978, Gotham was bankrupt in all but name. After nearly defaulting on \$600 million in bonds in 1975—and having received from President Gerald Ford so curt a rebuff to Mayor Beame's plea for a federal bailout that the *New York Daily News* immortalized it in the headline "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD"—New York had lost control of its finances to a board of officials and corporate chiefs. Appointed by prudent Governor Hugh Carey and financier Felix Rohatyn, the board wrung some aid from a grudging Washington in exchange for a strict austerity pledge



that bequeathed Koch a financially strapped city, its streets potholed and garbage-strewn. New President Jimmy Carter, who winced on seeing the half-burnt-out Bronx a month before Koch's election, announced that the Great Society's vision of Washington as urban America's savior was over. The feds would help, but city officials and local businesses had to spearhead the rebuilding.

That was fine with Koch. He was a Reform Democrat, beholden neither to the machine nor to party mythology, and he recognized with some scorn that New York was not so much a showcase of New Deal and Great Society programs as a museum of their failures. President Franklin Roosevelt and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia had envisioned turning Gotham into a demonstration project of what Dyja dubs the "Workers' Paradise," with its public housing, public university, and public hospitals; President Lyndon Johnson, backed by Mayors Robert F. Wagner, Jr., and John Lindsay, set up the Great Society's model community-organizing outfits in New York. But Koch—whose Depression-era childhood scrounging for tips as a hat-check boy convinced him that "[t]o live on the largesse of people is...demeaning"—saw that the redistributionist New Deal programs unintentionally fostered dependency, while the Great Society ones spawned corruption as well, and he gladly defunded them. As he said, "[t]he good-government groups and social workers destroyed the city for twenty years."

**K**OCH TOOK ON ANOTHER OLD DEMOCRAT shibboleth in 1980. With labor union power already swollen by the New Deal's Wagner Act—sponsored by New York Senator Robert F. Wagner, Sr.—the decision of his son, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., in 1958 to let municipal workers unionize made public unions the decisive force in city politics. Their insatiable wage and benefit demands spawned much of the fiscal mess bedeviling Koch. When the transit workers struck on April Fools' Day 1980, Koch, glimpsing from City Hall vast crowds walking to work over the Brooklyn Bridge, ran out to head the parade and crown himself its leader, yelling, "[w]e're not going to let these bastards bring us to our knees" to the cheering throng. "We changed the mood of the people of the city of New York," Koch later crowed of the strike's swift end. That moment, Dyja concludes, "announced the end of New York as a union town." If only.

Meanwhile, the civic-minded bankers who'd framed the financial rescue board were mapping their plans to stoke economic growth, the only way to raise city revenues,

Dyja acknowledges. Citibank chief Walter Wriston saw New York's future as a center of finance wed to information technology; he had already outfitted his bank's branches with the earliest ATMs and was now transforming Citi into a financial supermarket. Chase Bank boss David Rockefeller saw real estate development as the key to Gotham's future, and Battery Park City would soon rise. The Great Inflation of the 1970s, along with tax and zoning incentives, began to make New York's smaller fry real-estate conscious, too. As one million taxpaying New Yorkers fled the fraying city between 1968 and 1978, urban pioneers began snapping up the dirt-cheap brownstones they'd left behind, the lofts that once housed vanished sweatshops, and co-op and condo apartments in converted rental buildings whose landlords were thrilled to cash out in an inflating market. Gentrification had begun, and buildings whose decades-old ingrained grime seemed like an unalterable fact of nature got steam cleaned. The city washed its face—which proved lovely.

**K**OCH STARTED CLEANING UP NEW York's public spaces too. Gotham's streets, he saw with distaste, were no longer paved with gold but with dog doo; with help from Albany, he got a pooper scooper law enacted in August 1978. Dog owners howled in outrage, but the message was that the streets belong to everybody—you have no right to commandeer them for Fifi's private needs, but must respect other people's right to the clean enjoyment of them. A small lesson, with big, salutary ramifications.

Koch's enterprising Parks Commissioner, Gordon Davis, turned his gift for recognizing talent and seizing opportunity to rehabilitating his public bailiwick, too. He made visionary urbanist Betsy Barlow Central Park Administrator, and put her together with the philanthropic odd couple of Richard Gilder and George Soros to create the Central Park Conservancy, which poured tens of millions of private philanthropic dollars into restoring the crumbling dustbowl that Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's 843-acre masterpiece of landscape architecture had become. Starting in 1980, the Conservancy resodded lawns, installed underground sprinklers, repaired dilapidated rustic buildings and art nouveau bridges, dredged junk-clogged ponds, and resuscitated New York's most beautiful space, Bethesda Terrace. As we New Yorkers thronged back into our newly verdant park, we had our first inkling that the city could be healed—that what human folly had marred, human ingenuity and will could mend.

**I**N THE SAME SPIRIT, LANDLORDS AND businessmen were contributing to spruce up their neighborhoods through Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), private nonprofits that cleaned streets and adorned them with planters, reproduction historical streetlights, and the like, and kept them safe with private security guards. The Grand Central Partnership—formed in desperation after Mobil fled its headquarters across from Grand Central Terminal for verdant Virginia to escape the aggressively panhandling homeless, the graffiti-vandalized buildings, the reeking pools of urine, and the pervasive atmosphere of threat at the very heart of Manhattan—began operations in 1988 under the firm hand of Daniel Biederman, scrubbing and patrolling its 70-block neighborhood, offering shelter and services to the homeless population. Many of them were the mentally ill once cared for in the state's asylums—emptied by good, if vague, intentions and replaced only with noisy advocates who believed that living in filth in the streets represented freedom. Many, including Dyja, imagined that more "affordable housing" would solve the problem.

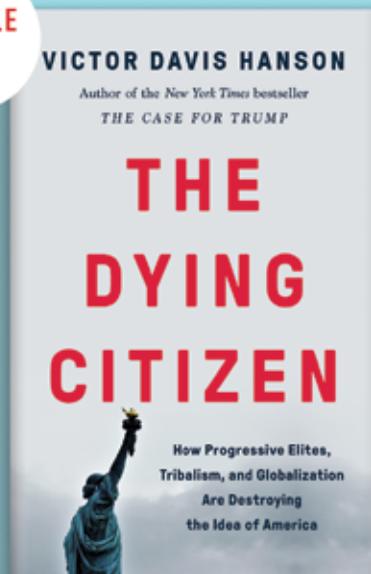
A few blocks west on 42nd Street, behind the New York Public Library, another Biederman-headed BID transformed Bryant Park from a drug- and mugger-infested vice zone into a velvet-lawned Elysium with Paris-style garden chairs, which thronged with nearby office workers enjoying festive picnic lunches from the moment it reopened in April 1992. Still farther west, the Times Square BID, with contributions from 400 landlords and 5,000 businesses, worked a similar miracle around the Crossroads of the World, forcing out the sex sleaze and its attendant crime—replacing a peep show with a bridal shop, for example, a porn theater with a family one, and making a deal with Disney to restore the famous but moldering gilded-age New Amsterdam Theater as a showcase for such live extravaganzas as *Beauty and the Beast*.

Koch had run his first campaign, Dyja reminds us, on a promise to bring back the death penalty, and *New York, New York, New York* recounts the grim reality that triggered such a vow. Murders in New York began to rise at an accelerating rate beginning in 1960. They almost quadrupled between the start of that year and the end of 1972, and had quadrupled further by the end of Koch's third term in 1989. Half the Broadway theaters were closed because people were afraid to go out after dark.

Koch was hardly the only one thinking about the death penalty. The 1974 hit film *Death Wish*—part of a popular revenge genre

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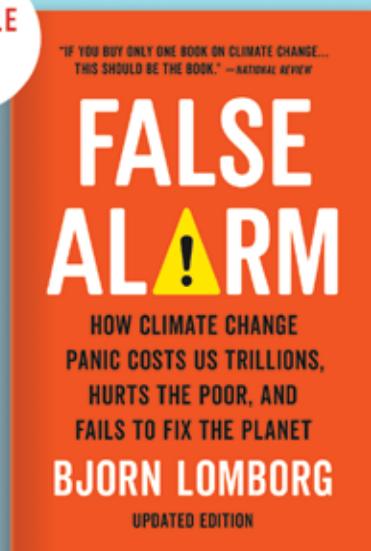
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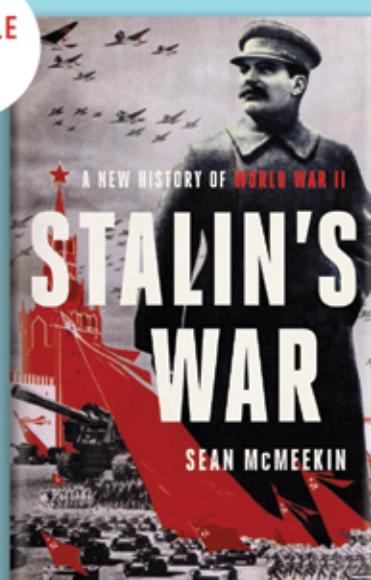
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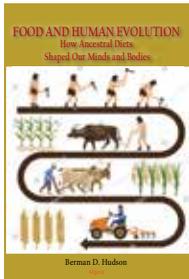
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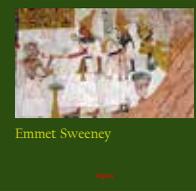


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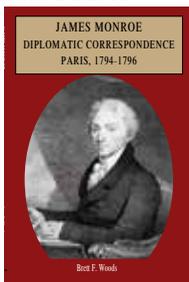
Modern Egyptologists tell us that Seti I and Ramses II reigned 700 years before the rise of the Medes and Persians, but matching events, matching biographies, and matching cultural artifacts identify Seti II, hailed by the Egyptians as a warrior and hero, with Inaros, the Egyptian patriot who waged war against Xerxes and was eventually impaled on the orders of Artaxerxes I. Archeological and linguistic evidence indicate the dynasty of Ramses II was terminated by the Persian Conquest of Egypt (525 BC). Sweeney has researched this topic for 25 years, including extensive travel.

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spawned by that crime-ridden era, including *Walking Tall*, *Taxi Driver*, and Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* films—portrayed a liberal Upper West Sider whose wife's murder and daughter's sexual assault turn him into a pistol-toting vigilante who goes looking for muggers and kills them, to the applause of the tabloids and wonder of his fellow New Yorkers. They are in no confusion about who the criminals are. "The underprivileged are beating our brains out," says one character, and, when another objects that the vigilante is racist, a no-nonsense proto-Heather Mac Donald snaps, "Oh for Pete's sake, Harry, more blacks are mugging than whites. What do you want us to do? Increase the proportion of white muggers, so we'll have racial equality among muggers?" In the movie, muggings soon drop by half. In 1984, as crime kept soaring, the vigilante films found a real-life echo when nerdy Bernhard Goetz shot four teens who tried to mug him at knifepoint on the subway.

**M**URDERS HIT THEIR PEAK OF 2,245—one every four hours—in 1990, the first year of Koch's successor, the dapper, genial, and feckless Mayor David Dinkins. That September, when muggers killed a 22-year-old tourist trying to protect his mother, a *New York Post* headline demanded "DAVE, DO SOMETHING!" Violent crime did begin to drop a little, for which Dyja wants to credit Dinkins, the city's first black mayor.

Which is where the book skids off the road.

Dinkins didn't do it. Credit first three Bostonians: Robert Kiley and David Gunn, named under Koch in the mid-1980s to head the public transportation system, and William Bratton, whom they hired as Transit Police chief a few months into Dinkins's term. Together, they recivilized the subways, central to New Yorkers' daily lives. They spruced up the stations and cleaned off the graffiti that fouled every car from stem to stern, subjecting riders to what Dyja rightly calls a repeated "visual mugging." That alone made the subways seem less threatening, a realm the authorities had under control.

Then Bratton showed that you didn't need the death penalty to cut crime. The Bostonians had hired criminologist George Kelling as a consultant, impressed by his theory that minor crimes of disorder left unaddressed would, like broken windows, send the message that no one cares, emboldening the lawless to commit more serious crimes. Deal with the minor crimes and you will not only have more orderly and welcoming public spaces, but also less major crime. Bratton started arresting and questioning subway turnstile

jumpers, and, urged on by his Damon Runyonesque lieutenant, Jack Maple, checking for outstanding warrants—of which he found many, since major criminals also don't pay fares. Crime dropped in the subways, as it was dropping in the privately policed BIDs, affecting the citywide crime statistics.

HARD-DRIVING FEDERAL PROSECUTOR Rudy Giuliani replaced Dinkins as mayor in 1994 and made Bratton police commissioner. Dyja kindly credits *City Journal*, the magazine I ran throughout Giuliani's two terms and his successor's first one, for serving as Giuliani's "Mayor School." *City Journal* made the case for public order and activist policing, including not just enforcement of quality-of-life laws (e.g., against fare-beating or public urination), but checking minor offenders for guns, using decoys on the subways and streets, improving police training in crowd control and defusing confrontations, breaking up the criminal infrastructure of stolen-goods fences and chop shops for stolen cars, and modernizing Jack Maple's scheme of maps and push-pins into a computerized system, called Compstat, that mapped criminal activity so cops could recognize crime hot spots and flood them at likely hours to deter lawbreaking. At twice-weekly meetings, top brass grilled precinct captains about how they were fixing the computer-tracked problems. Bratton gave them wide discretion to try new ideas and didn't flinch from replacing non-performers. His overarching principle was that police existed to prevent crime from happening, not just, as then believed, to solve crime after it had occurred—a time-honored principle that Sir Robert Peel had enunciated when he established the first modern police force in London in 1829, and that New York police manuals had echoed up through World War I.

Bratton called his shots: he vowed to cut crime by 12% in 1994 and 17% in 1995 (actual numbers: 12.3% in '94 and 17% in '95), a precipitous citywide drop that continued at the same rate under Bratton's faithful successors (until recently). Murders hit a low of 289 in 2018, an 87% drop from the peak. Good ideas need political will and leadership to turn them into policy. Giuliani's staunch backing of proactive policing and the cops who were carrying it out made the crucial difference for the NYPD. When cops make mistakes, as they did when they shot Amadou Diallo in 1999, officers need to know that the politicians in charge will not scapegoat them. They even need to know that when the rare bad apple does something inexcusable and racist, such as happened to Abner Louima in 1997, the cops will explain that such



individual evil does not define the whole force. (Dyja insists the contrary.)

Cops especially need to know that the pats will defend them against the inevitable charge of racism, since the 24% of New Yorkers who are black commit 72% of the city's shootings (and Hispanics commit almost all the rest). The victims, too, are overwhelmingly black. To charges that police stop, question, and frisk disproportionate numbers of blacks (a Bratton tactic when cops suspect someone is carrying a weapon) politicians need to reply that the stops are not disproportionate to the numbers of black lawbreakers. Dyja is right that stop-and-frisks became more prevalent than necessary toward the end of Michael Bloomberg's mayoralty, but it is calumny to say, as he does, that the NYPD became "an occupying force, destroying at least as many lives with their tactics as they'd once saved with them" due to their "regular, sanctioned harassment of People of Color"—as if law-abiding minority citizens don't want to be safe in their streets as much as other New Yorkers.

IT'S FUN TO WATCH DYJA BEND OVER BACKWARD to try to avoid crediting the astonishing crime drop to Giuliani, "one of the most venomous mayors in city history." "In the end, no one policy or person ended crime as it was known in New York," he asserts—twice, in case we missed the first time. "It's possible," Dyja contends, "that the fever of crime would have broken no matter what," perhaps thanks to the Civility Fairy. But as Giuliani resolutely restored public safety, restaurants and theaters opened, boarded up neighborhoods came back to life, free-spending tourists flocked in, and new residents arrived from all over the country and the world, boosting Gotham's population above 8 million for the first time. *New York* magazine's Christmas 1994 cover headline, "NEW YORK IS BACK," heralded the start of the city's quarter-century golden age.

Two related confusions further muddy Dyja's account. The first concerns money—and let's remember it's *private* money, not government and the high taxes it imposes, that gave New York the museums, concert halls, medical schools, and so on that make it a world city (or "luxury city," as Mayor Bloomberg liked to call it). Citibank CEO Walter Wriston's dream of Gotham as a re-energized financial powerhouse came true almost instantly. By 1982, finance employed more New Yorkers than manufacturing did, and it enriched both a handful of tycoons and an army of prosperous burghers, who revitalized the city's economy by their spending on everything from Central Park restoration and Metropolitan Museum galas to neighborhood gentrification,

treats from new gourmet shops, and wages for nannies, contractors, housekeepers, and piano teachers. Soon after, David Rockefeller's real estate dream materialized; and under Mayor Bloomberg, a rebuilt World Trade Center arose, part of a forest of glittering monstrosities from Billionaires' Row to Hudson Yards that engulfed beautiful Beaux Arts and Art Deco Gotham.

SQUEAMISH ABOUT CAPITALISM, DYJA doesn't understand the function of the bankers, brokers, and investors, with their attendant lawyers, accountants, and analysts, who provide the capital that fuels New York. Skeptical that they create real wealth and dubious about their ethics, he imagines that financiers are in essence company-despoiling asset strippers, that "greedy banks" are constantly hoodwinking minority homebuyers into taking out "NINJA" mortgages—no income, no job, no assets—they can never repay, and that capitalists are all Ponzi schemers like Bernie Madoff, enticing people into "a dream world of magic," bound to collapse. The dot-com bust, then the Great Financial Crisis, revealed how cynically "New Yorkers had been victimized by their white-collar neighbors," he charges—a false proposition, containing the further falsehood that no one bears any responsibility for asking if a deal too good to be true is legitimate. Lurking beneath Dyja's argument is the half-formed suspicion that the rich extract their wealth from the hides of the humble—as if, but for monied predators, the humble would roll in prosperity. No matter how philanthropic they may be, "wealthy New Yorkers...must come to terms with the fact that...their Lifestyles and all they do to preserve them are prime causes of inequality"—a statement as silly as it is circular.

Finally, there is Dyja's confusion about race. He notes that as the city's economy started to flourish in the 1980s, a black underclass swelled. Poverty, concentrated in minority neighborhoods and among a fast-growing cohort of single-mother families, rose more sharply than the national average. The crack cocaine epidemic was ravaging those neighborhoods too, along with the surge in black crime. Why? Dyja invokes an explanation I gave in *The Dream and the Nightmare* (1993), but he garbles it, so let me state it briefly. The 1960s saw a revolution in elite American culture, which glamorized sexual liberation, drug experimentation, dropping out, and defiance of authority, while it excused black lawbreaking as a revolt against white oppression and destigmatized welfare as reparations for slavery and racism. Because beliefs, not calculations of economic interest, principally shape behav-

ior, when these attitudes reached the ghetto the result was an explosion of drug use, school dropout, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and crime. Mainstream culture, seeing the consequences of such views, partly returned to its senses. Underclass culture did not.

Ultimately, Dyja brushes aside that explanation, not so much for its falsity as for its unsophisticated imposition of middle-class, white morality, with its "oppressive, if familiar, norms about sex, race, and class." By contrast, his book almost obsessively celebrates hip-hop culture as the voice of a black "authenticity" that is "about being real"—hip hop "aims to embrace not escape the ghetto" and is "not just a f[---] you to white society" but "a f[---] you to the previous Black generation as well," presumably the one that wanted to be judged by the content of its character.

LIKE SOMEONE WITH A COMB-OVER AND an incipient middle-aged paunch dressing in the fashions of the young, Dyja strives desperately to be hip, like the cool Black Lives Matter kids with their systemic racism. But he is just continuing the work of destruction the 1960s cultural revolution began. One of the book's telling errors shows how grievously destructive these nihilistic attitudes are. Dyja cites the 1985 "case of Edmund Perry, a Stanford student shot by an officer who falsely claimed Perry and his brother tried to mug him." Not so. Perry was a smart Harlem kid recruited for "diversity" by a top prep school, from which he'd just graduated. Home for the summer before enrolling at Stanford, he was evidently feeling the tension between the new identity he was taking on and the old one he felt he was betraying, as *Time* and *New Times* journalist Robert Anson reported in his riveting investigation of the case, *Best Intentions* (1987). Perhaps ribbed by his brother for acting white and challenged to help mug a passing white man to prove his ghetto *bona fides*, Perry found himself wrestling with an off-duty police rookie, who groped for the gun in his ankle holster and shot Perry dead.

But for such senseless authenticity, Perry would have made his way upward in the great Opportunity City, so open to talent that by 2010, Dyja reports, "half of the city's accountants and nurses, 40% of its doctors, real estate brokers, and property managers were immigrants" of every color. That's the real New York authenticity, the one worth cheering three times over.

*Myron Magnet, a National Humanities Medalist, is the author, most recently, of Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution (Encounter Books).*

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