

Working Class New York

Joshua B. Freeman



Life and Labor Since World War II

CHRONOLOGY

JANUARY 1944	President Franklin D. Roosevelt calls for an Economic Bill of Rights
SEPTEMBER 1945	World War II ends
SEPTEMBER 1945	Elevator operators' strike ties up Manhattan
NOVEMBER 1945	William O'Dwyer elected mayor
FEBRUARY 1946	Tugboat strike cuts off fuel supplies
JUNE 1947	Congress passes Taft-Hartley Act
MARCH 1948	Clerks strike the New York Stock Exchange
NOVEMBER 1948	The Congress of Industrial Organizations revokes charter of the Greater New York Industrial Council
MAY 1950	New York State institutes rent control
JUNE 1950	Korean War begins
SEPTEMBER 1950	Vincent Impellitteri becomes mayor when O'Dwyer resigns
NOVEMBER 1953	Robert F. Wagner, Jr. elected mayor
OCTOBER 1954	Sitdown strike fails to stop American Safety Razor from moving to Virginia
NOVEMBER 1955	Two thousand Parks Department workers hold one-day strike
DECEMBER 1955	The American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merge to form the AFL-CIO
APRIL 1956	Commercial containership operation begins in port
MARCH 1958	Mayor Wagner establishes collective bargaining procedures for city employees
APRIL 1958	The Brooklyn Dodgers move to Los Angeles, the New York Giants to San Francisco
NOVEMBER 1958	Nelson Rockefeller elected governor
FEBRUARY 1959	New York City AFL and CIO Councils merge
MAY 1959	Local 1199 strikes voluntary hospitals
DECEMBER 1962	114-day newspaper strike begins
FEBRUARY 1964	Public-school boycott demands racial integration

CHRONOLOGY

JULY 1964	Rioting in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant
OCTOBER 1965	Congress passes immigration reform act
NOVEMBER 1965	John V. Lindsay elected mayor
JANUARY 1966	Transit workers hold a twelve-day strike
JUNE 1966	Brooklyn Navy Yard closes
NOVEMBER 1966	Voters reject a police civilian review board
SEPTEMBER 1967	Teachers strike for higher pay
MAY TO NOVEMBER 1968	Teachers strike four times in Ocean Hill–Brownsville community control controversy
DECEMBER 1968	Co-op City opens
MAY 1969	CUNY student protests lead to open admissions
JUNE 1969	Stonewall Inn patrons fight police raiders
MARCH 1970	Postal workers strike
MAY 1970	Construction workers attack antiwar protesters in lower Manhattan
NOVEMBER 1973	Abraham Beame elected mayor
SPRING 1975	New York City fiscal crisis begins
OCTOBER 1975	“FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD”
JULY 1977	Widespread looting during citywide blackout
NOVEMBER 1977	Edward I. Koch elected mayor
APRIL 1980	Transit workers strike for eleven days
SEPTEMBER 1981	Two hundred thousand march in revived Labor Day Parade
DECEMBER 1983	First residents move into Charlotte Gardens in the South Bronx
OCTOBER 1987	Stock market plunges
NOVEMBER 1989	David Dinkins elected mayor
OCTOBER 1990	147-day strike at <i>Daily News</i> begins
NOVEMBER 1993	Rudolph Giuliani elected mayor
OCTOBER 1995	John Sweeney elected president of AFL-CIO
SEPTEMBER 1996	Labor Day Parade moved to weekend after Labor Day
JUNE 1998	Protesting construction workers paralyze midtown Manhattan

INTRODUCTION:

WHAT MADE NEW YORK GREAT

A visitor wandering the streets of mid-twentieth-century New York would have had no trouble discerning the social centrality of its working class. It was palpable in the bustling port and manufacturing districts in the heart of the city, in the sprawling residential neighborhoods of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan, in the strikes that periodically crippled the region, in the mass following of the American Labor and Liberal parties, in musical and comedic styles that became internationally renowned, and in the argot with which local denizens communicated. Working-class New Yorkers, through political groups, tenant and neighborhood associations, fraternal and ethnic societies, and above all unions, played a pervasive role in shaping the city's social, economic, and political structure. Their culture, style, and worldview, elements of which were appropriated and disseminated by intellectuals, artists, entertainers, and merchants, helped pattern the moral and aesthetic fabric of the city and the nation.

The cosmopolitanism, energy, and sophistication of New York's working population was a major factor in the city's post-World War II success in projecting itself as the global center of power, innovation, and modernity. Over time, though, workers and their institutions proved unable to check a series of developments that led to their marginalization. By the 1990s, the tenor and trajectory of New York increasingly derived from its position as a global city connected to markets and tastemakers throughout the world, while its own toiling majority receded into the background.

The story of working-class New York is one of triumph and confinement. It is a saga of growing power and declining influence, of institutions that served their constituents well but stopped being seen as central to the future. It is a story of massive movements of population and industry, tenacious struggles for rights and equality, and ongoing discrimination and inequity.

Yet the remarkable history of New York workers and their families since World War II remains almost wholly unknown outside the ranks of those who lived through it. The vast literature celebrating postwar New York—by E. B. White, V. S. Pritchett, Jan Morris, Truman Capote, Willie Morris, and others—generally ignores the very existence of workers, an astonishing blindness since, during what is usually hailed as its heyday, New York was a

working-class city, demographically, economically, politically, and socially. When workers do appear in these accounts, they usually do so as picaresque ethnics, providing colorful background for more illustrious protagonists.¹ Too often, chroniclers of New York see their own kind—writers, artists, businessmen, and politicians—as *the* creators of the city and its ethos, ignoring the millions of workers and husbands and wives and children of workers who populated it, kept its economy going, and gave it cultural greatness. Scholars have not done much better; given the economic, political, and cultural importance of New York City, they have written remarkably little about the history of its working class during the last half century.²

Without taking into account the impact of labor, no rendering of New York's past can explain why the city's political, social, economic, and even physical development so deviated from national norms. By the same token, looking at New York forces a rethinking of the history of American labor. New York workers and their organizations did not fit the picture usually found in histories of post-World War II labor, which emphasize mass production industry and heavily male industrial unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).³ In New York, small firms and craft or conglomerate unions, with a large number of female members—most often affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—dominated. Yet unionism in New York proved more resilient than elsewhere; in most of the country the percentage of the workforce belonging to unions dropped sharply between World War II and the late 1980s, but in New York it remained steady (so that in the 1990s it more than doubled the national figure).⁴ Furthermore, while organized labor usually is portrayed as having had its greatest political influence during the 1930s and 1940s, the power of the New York labor movement peaked between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s. Understanding why New York remained a union town while labor waned nationally helps explain the character of the modern labor movement and its place in the political economy.

The title of this book knowingly goes against academic and political fashion. In contemporary discourse, the very term “working class” is jarring. For a century it was a common part of the lexicon of industrialism. Usually it simply referred collectively to those people in nonmanagerial positions who worked for wages. That is how I use it in this book, encompassing both blue- and white-collar workers and their immediate family members. These days, when Americans speak of class at all, they usually define it not by the type of work people do but by their level of income or wealth. Occasionally, I use

such categorizations, too, for example the
 But a central thesis of this book is that
 in many circumstances, thought and ac-
 part, from their structural position in the c.
 quences for themselves and their city.⁵

Unless otherwise noted, I use the term New Y.
 City proper. Many studies of postwar New York stre.
 looking at the metropolitan region as a whole to understand.
 This study stresses the importance of city institutions and ca.
 shaping the everyday lives of city residents.

I spent most of my childhood and nearly all my adult life in New York Ca.
 during the period this book covers. Though in no way a memoir, occasionally
 I have drawn on my experiences or those of my family for illustration. Like
 most New Yorkers, I have deeply conflicted feelings about the city. Endlessly
 frustrated by its difficulties and brutalities, try as I may I find it difficult to
 imagine living elsewhere. What keeps me in New York is neither the high cul-
 ture of museums and concert halls nor the unrivaled opportunities for work-
 ing, eating, and spending that New Yorkers revel in. Rather it is a sensibility
 that is distinctly working-class — generous; open-minded but skeptical; ideal-
 istic but deflating of pretension; bursting with energy and a commitment to
 doing. This was the sensibility of my grandparents, who after hard days of
 work spent evenings and weekends at union meetings, fraternal affairs, lec-
 tures, and amusement parks. Poor people, they lived full lives raising chil-
 dren, caring for parents, trekking off to the country, and, in modest but self-
 conscious ways, seeking to revolutionize society in the name of justice and
 equality. I still glimpse this sensibility in the subways and on the streets and in
 the public schools.

As its working class has lost influence, New York has become a less civi-
 lized, more alienated community. I for one neither want to nor believe it pos-
 sible to return to a putative golden past. Fifty years ago the Dodgers may have
 played in Brooklyn, but for most New Yorkers life meant grueling work, little
 security, and much prejudice. But I do hope that this book illuminates the
 possibilities for ordinary people to play a greater role in shaping their city and
 nation than they do today. So much of what made New York great came from
 their labor, their struggles, their jokes, and their songs. Forgetting that im-
 poverishes us all.

working-class city, demographically, economically, politically, and socially. When workers do appear in these accounts, they usually do so as picaresque ethnics, providing colorful background for more illustrious protagonists.¹ Too often, chroniclers of New York see their own kind—writers, artists, businessmen, and politicians—as *the* creators of the city and its ethos, ignoring the millions of workers and husbands and wives and children of workers who populated it, kept its economy going, and gave it cultural greatness. Scholars have not done much better; given the economic, political, and cultural importance of New York City, they have written remarkably little about the history of its working class during the last half century.²

Without taking into account the impact of labor, no rendering of New York's past can explain why the city's political, social, economic, and even physical development so deviated from national norms. By the same token, looking at New York forces a rethinking of the history of American labor. New York workers and their organizations did not fit the picture usually found in histories of post-World War II labor, which emphasize mass production industry and heavily male industrial unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).³ In New York, small firms and craft or conglomerate unions, with a large number of female members—most often affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—dominated. Yet unionism in New York proved more resilient than elsewhere; in most of the country the percentage of the workforce belonging to unions dropped sharply between World War II and the late 1980s, but in New York it remained steady (so that in the 1990s it more than doubled the national figure).⁴ Furthermore, while organized labor usually is portrayed as having had its greatest political influence during the 1930s and 1940s, the power of the New York labor movement peaked between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s. Understanding why New York remained a union town while labor waned nationally helps explain the character of the modern labor movement and its place in the political economy.

The title of this book knowingly goes against academic and political fashion. In contemporary discourse, the very term “working class” is jarring. For a century it was a common part of the lexicon of industrialism. Usually it simply referred collectively to those people in nonmanagerial positions who worked for wages. That is how I use it in this book, encompassing both blue- and white-collar workers and their immediate family members. These days, when Americans speak of class at all, they usually define it not by the type of work people do but by their level of income or wealth. Occasionally, I use

such categorizations, too, for example the terms middle-class or low-income. But a central thesis of this book is that New York workers, at many times and in many circumstances, thought and acted in ways that stemmed, at least in part, from their structural position in the economy, with important consequences for themselves and their city.⁵

Unless otherwise noted, I use the term New York to refer to New York City proper. Many studies of postwar New York stress the importance of looking at the metropolitan region as a whole to understand any of its parts.⁶ This study stresses the importance of city institutions and city politics in shaping the everyday lives of city residents.

I spent most of my childhood and nearly all my adult life in New York City during the period this book covers. Though in no way a memoir, occasionally I have drawn on my experiences or those of my family for illustration. Like most New Yorkers, I have deeply conflicted feelings about the city. Endlessly frustrated by its difficulties and brutalities, try as I may I find it difficult to imagine living elsewhere. What keeps me in New York is neither the high culture of museums and concert halls nor the unrivaled opportunities for working, eating, and spending that New Yorkers revel in. Rather it is a sensibility that is distinctly working-class — generous; open-minded but skeptical; idealistic but deflating of pretension; bursting with energy and a commitment to doing. This was the sensibility of my grandparents, who after hard days of work spent evenings and weekends at union meetings, fraternal affairs, lectures, and amusement parks. Poor people, they lived full lives raising children, caring for parents, trekking off to the country, and, in modest but self-conscious ways, seeking to revolutionize society in the name of justice and equality. I still glimpse this sensibility in the subways and on the streets and in the public schools.

As its working class has lost influence, New York has become a less civilized, more alienated community. I for one neither want to nor believe it possible to return to a putative golden past. Fifty years ago the Dodgers may have played in Brooklyn, but for most New Yorkers life meant grueling work, little security, and much prejudice. But I do hope that this book illuminates the possibilities for ordinary people to play a greater role in shaping their city and nation than they do today. So much of what made New York great came from their labor, their struggles, their jokes, and their songs. Forgetting that impoverishes us all.

PART ONE

Proletarian City

Without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.

—“Solidarity Forever”

CHAPTER 1.

A Non-Fordist City in the Age of Ford

On September 24, 1945, barely three weeks after the end of World War II, the main business districts of New York City ground to a halt. For a week over a million-and-a-half workers milled around the streets or stayed home. Mail and railway express delivery halted, and federal tax collections fell by eight million dollars a day. This estimated one hundred million dollar loss to the economy stemmed from a strike by fifteen thousand elevator operators, doormen, porters, firemen, and maintenance workers employed in commercial buildings.

In an era when automated elevators were a rarity, elevator operators played an indispensable role in high-rise cities. Their strike, after a prolonged dispute over whether or not building owners would accept contract recommendations made by a War Labor Board panel, revealed the power of New York labor as the postwar epoch began. “The normal routine of thousands of professional, financial and manufacturing establishments,” the *New York Herald Tribune* reported, “was at a near standstill in the world’s financial and business capital.” Hundreds of thousands of blue-collar workers, executives, clerical workers, mailmen, deliverymen, and tax collectors could not or would not walk up dozens of flights of steps to reach their shops or offices. The garment district completely shut down as a quarter of a million members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW), the Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers, and the Fur and Leather Workers stayed out of work, following “an unwritten law” to respect picket lines. The militance of the strikers made wholesale use of strikebreakers impractical. When the owners of one insurance company building tried it, twenty-year-old Evelyn Wensel, a striking elevator operator from the Bronx, slapped and punched her replacement, leading to the walk-out’s first arrest. After five days of mounting economic damage, Governor Thomas E. Dewey pressured both sides to declare a truce and accept his appointment of an arbitrator, who ultimately dictated settlement terms favorable to the strikers.¹

The building workers’ walkout commenced a yearlong series of strikes

that touched the lives of virtually all New Yorkers, part of the greatest strike wave in United States history. Nationally, in 1945, 3.5 million workers struck, topped the next year by 4.6 million, over 10 percent of the work force.² In New York, the breadth and complexity of the labor movement gave it access to multiple pressure points capable of crippling the city.

New York strikes during the year after the war included a weeklong walkout by ten thousand painters; a four-week strike by seven thousand members of the American Communications Association that disrupted telegraph communication into and out of the city; a 114-day strike against the Brooklyn-based Mergenthaler Co., the largest maker of linotype equipment in the country; and a series of trucking strikes culminating in a September 1946 walkout by twelve thousand Teamsters that led to empty grocery store shelves and factory closings.³ Sprinkled among these clashes were a myriad of smaller confrontations: a strike of Times Square motion picture projectionists, a lockout of thirty Newspaper Guild members at *Billboard* magazine, a walkout by eight hundred Brooklyn and Manhattan bakers.⁴

Some of the largest clashes took place on the waterfront. On October 1, 1945, almost immediately after the building workers' strike, stevedores at six Chelsea docks walked off their jobs to protest a proposed contract their union president, Joseph P. Ryan, had negotiated with the New York Shipping Association. Their wildcat strike quickly spread to thirty-five thousand members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) throughout the port.⁵ Ryan's proposed agreement failed to address many worker demands, including modifications in the shape-up system for hiring and a weight limit on sling loads, which had increased greatly during the war. Equally important, workers wanted more say in their union. Many ILA locals rarely met, Ryan recently had been designated union president for life, and corruption and thuggery was widespread.⁶

At first the strikers had no organization, no spokespeople, not even formal demands. But with the help of the Communists—a dockside presence, particularly in Brooklyn—they soon formulated demands and selected a leadership. Realizing that the contract he negotiated had become irrelevant, Ryan pressed the employers to grant new concessions while urging the longshoremen to return to work.

After two weeks, the dockworkers began to drift back to their jobs. With the strike effectively broken, negotiations between the ILA and the shipping association resumed. Eventually an arbitrator granted the workers a larger

wage hike and better conditions than in the contract Ryan had negotiated, but not a limit on sling loads, the issue that helped set off the walkout.⁷

Just four months later, labor turmoil in the port resumed when 3,500 tugboat workers walked off their jobs. Like elevator operators, tugboat men held a strategic place in the life of New York: in addition to docking large vessels, they moved freight back and forth across the harbor, including barges that delivered 65 percent of the city's coal and 95 percent of its fuel oil. With fuel supplies already low, their midwinter strike raised the specter of buildings without heat, closed industrial facilities, and a grinding halt of the transportation system. Newly-inaugurated Mayor William O'Dwyer declared it "the worst threat ever made to the city."⁸

The tugboat workers' strike raised a question affecting labor relations throughout the country: what would be the postwar relationship between wages, prices, and profits? During the fight against the Axis, the federal government had controlled wages and prices. Through most of 1946 it kept some price controls in place to check anticipated inflation. The tugboat owners, like many employers, wanted assurances that they would be allowed to raise their prices to cover increased labor costs before they granted substantial wage increases. By contrast, the labor movement and federal government argued that most employers could raise wages without raising prices and still make a healthy profit.⁹

With bargaining at a standstill, on February 6, 1946, the third day of the strike, President Harry S Truman seized control of the struck tugboats. The strikers, unimpressed, voted two-to-one to remain off their jobs. With fuel shortages looming, O'Dwyer took drastic action. First, he ordered that outside advertising lights be turned off, temperatures in most buildings be lowered to sixty degrees, heat be shut off on subway and trolley cars, and that no fuel be delivered to schools or amusement places.¹⁰ On February 11 he went further, ordering all schools, stores, libraries, museums, theaters, restaurants, and "business and industrial establishments" closed. Policemen, dispatched to subway stops, railway stations, and ferry terminals, urged the public not to enter midtown or downtown Manhattan. The next day, according to the *New York Times*, saw "the most drastic disruption in the city's life since the Civil War draft riots." In imagery seemingly taken from a film noir, a *World-Telegram* reporter wrote that "tugstruck New York's millions . . . struggled to do all their accustomed little things while a dreadful, unnamed power held them in its grasp. An air of unreality hung over the city. Incidents took on a staccato, dream quality; sharply etched, touched with hysteria,

cockeyed.” The next day the tugboat strike ended when both sides agreed to the mayor’s proposal that they submit their differences to a board of arbitration.¹¹

In late 1945 and 1946, as local labor conflicts buffeted New York, massive national strikes captured headlines throughout the country and sparked fierce debate in Washington over whether or not unions had accumulated too much power. Most struck national corporations operating large-scale facilities, a type of plant uncommon in the city. Of the 750,000 steelworkers who walked off their jobs on January 21, 1946, only 12,500 worked in the New York area and fewer than 2,000 in the city itself.¹² But a national strike of copper workers did have a strong presence in New York. The bulk of the 6,000 strikers who worked in New York-area copper plants lived in the city. Furthermore, most of the copper companies had their headquarters in Manhattan.

The fight against Phelps Dodge was especially rough. In an effort to keep operating its plant in Elizabeth, New Jersey—just across the harbor from New York—the company brought in scabs by boat from Brooklyn. Anthony Anastasia, brother of mob leader Albert Anastasia and the power behind several Brooklyn ILA locals, supervised the operation. New York City police boats escorted strikebreakers to the plant and shipments of wire from it. The strikers had boats, too, leading to fierce fighting in the harbor. In the course of the eight-month strike, Mario Russo, a veteran and father of four, was killed on an Elizabeth picket line, and numerous others were injured. In a final calamity, while folksinger Woody Guthrie sang to an Elizabeth rally marking the end of the strike, a fire in his Brooklyn apartment killed his four-year-old daughter.¹³

And so it went. In early 1946 a three-week strike against the “Big 4” meat-packing companies idled over two thousand workers in the city and forced many retail butcher shops to close.¹⁴ A nationwide railway strike in May halted New York’s extensive commuter rail system.¹⁵ Then, in the fall, New York harbor was again shut down by a seventeen-day national shipping strike. Less than two weeks later came yet another shipping strike, this time by licensed engineers and deck officers.¹⁶ In 1946 alone nearly a quarter of a million New York workers took part in walkouts, with 9 percent of the nation’s strikes taking place in the city. Only during the strike wave that followed World War I did more New York workers walk off their jobs.¹⁷

At the end of World War II, New York was a working-class city. In 1946, of the 3.3 million employed New Yorkers, less than 700,000 were proprietors,

managers, officials, professionals, or semiprofessionals. The other 2.6 million men and women neither owned the businesses for which they worked nor had substantial authority over their operations.¹⁸ They were, to use an old-fashioned term, proletarians. By themselves they made up one-third of the city's population of nearly eight million. Along with their husbands, wives, and children they were a clear majority.

The size, strategic importance, and demonstrated power of the working class allowed it to play a major role in determining what kind of city New York would become in the postwar era. When the war ended, the city stood on a cusp of history. "All the signs," Jan Morris later wrote, "were that it would be the supreme city of the Western world, or even the world as a whole." Seeming miracles of technical and social modernity abounded, from the television industry, then just getting started, to the United Nations.¹⁹ Yet as obvious as the future was the past. In a city where the largest, most advanced warships and passenger liners in the world regularly docked, fish still got delivered to the Fulton Fish Market in sail-powered boats. Horse-drawn wagons remained a common sight, delivering or selling coal, laundry, milk, vegetables, and fruit. In a city where sophisticated defense electronics got designed and built, St. Patrick's Cathedral and Bellevue Hospital still operated on DC current. One police precinct had gas lights. In a city where preliminary work for atomic fission had been done, potbellied stoves were being sold for home heating, and ice blocks were delivered for home refrigeration.²⁰

Culturally, socially, and politically, blue-collar workers loomed larger at the end of World War II than at any time before or since. During the war they had been courted and celebrated as key to the Allied victory. Everywhere Americans looked—in newspapers and magazines, on billboards, and at the movies—blue-collar workers were heroically portrayed. The sense that they finally had come into their own was not just the product of official and unofficial opinion makers; as the war ended, manual workers had tremendous élan, a self-confidence growing out of the successful unionization campaigns before the war and their strategic position, steady work, and rising income during it.²¹

At the end of World War II, roughly half of New York's wage workers made, moved, or maintained physical objects for a living, everything from corsets to skyscrapers to aircraft carriers. In 1946, 41 percent of the employed labor force consisted of craftsmen, operatives, laborers, foremen, and kindred workers, the occupational groupings usually considered blue collar. Another 12 percent were service workers, many of whom performed manual

labor: domestic servants, firemen, janitors, elevator operators, and the like.²²

Manual workers could be found in many settings—driving trucks, constructing buildings, cleaning hospitals, unloading ships—but the largest number by far worked in manufacturing. As John Gunther wrote in his 1947 best-seller, *Inside U.S.A.*, New York City was “incomparably the greatest manufacturing town on earth.” In 1947 over thirty-seven thousand city establishments were engaged in manufacturing, employing nearly three-quarters of a million production and 200,000 non-production workers.²³

The centrality of manufacturing to the New York economy undoubtedly surprised many readers of Gunther’s book (as it surprises many now), for the common image of New York was just the opposite. As a wartime Regional Plan Association (RPA) study noted, “A visitor to Manhattan seeing the tall office buildings dwarfing all other structures, and passing no huge steel mills with blast furnaces belching fire and smoke as in Chicago or Pittsburgh, or giant automobile factories as in Detroit, or long cotton mills as in New England or the South, might easily conclude that New York was mainly a region of white-collar workers supported by wholesale trade and banking.” But the RPA study found manufacturing “the chief support of the New York Metropolitan Region.”²⁴

New York had been a major manufacturing center since the earliest days of the republic. In 1950, 28 percent of the city’s employed workers were in manufacturing, two points above the national figure. The *percentage* of the city workforce employed in manufacturing had been declining since 1910, when it had peaked at just over 40 percent. However, except during the 1930s, the actual *number* of manufacturing workers in the city had risen each decade of the century. When World War II ended, New York manufacturing was at an all-time high.²⁵

In 1950 seven of the nation’s ten largest cities had a higher percentage of their workforces engaged in manufacturing than New York did. Nonetheless, in *absolute* terms New York City had a goods-producing economy unprecedented in size, output, and complexity. In 1947, New York had more manufacturing jobs than Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Boston put together.²⁶

The sheer size of the New York metropolitan area—in 1950 more than one out of every twelve Americans lived there—accounted for some of the distinctive characteristics of the city’s goods-producing sector. The New York market for capital and consumer goods was so large that manufacturing strictly to supply local needs was a huge enterprise. Four of the largest manu-

facturing establishments in New York City were local newspapers, while more than twenty-two thousand New Yorkers made bakery products, largely for local consumption.²⁷ Even in the case of New Yorkers producing goods that sold nationally, a substantial part of their output was consumed in the region.²⁸

The large local market gave a competitive advantage to New York firms in many industries, from hatmaking to linotype equipment, and contributed to the extraordinary heterogeneity of local manufacturing. A 1959 RPA study by Edgar M. Hoover and Raymond Vernon reported that “the pervasive impression of the Region’s manufacturing economy is one of diversity—diversity of product, of process, and of environmental needs,” a characterization seconded by many observers. In the immediate postwar years, Brooklyn alone had pencil and chewing gum factories, sugar and oil refineries, a naval shipyard, several large pharmaceutical plants, many machinery making companies, a kosher winery, and the world’s largest producer of leis. Hoover and Vernon reported that firms in 420 of the 450 industrial categories used by the Bureau of the Census could be found in the region.²⁹

For all its diversity, New York did not simply mirror the national economic structure. Far from it. The region dominated many small manufacturing industries, from umbrellas to scientific instruments, but of the seventeen largest manufacturing industries in the country (measured by employment), New York was heavily represented in only one, apparel.³⁰

In 1950, 70 percent of New York City manufacturing workers made non-durable goods (generally consumer items meant to last three years or less). By contrast, nationally only 46 percent of manufacturing workers made nondurables. 340,700 men and women—over a third of the city’s manufacturing workers and a tenth of its total work force—made apparel or related products. Another 119,200 were in printing and publishing, and 98,300 produced food or beverages. These three groups—apparel, printing and publishing, and food—together accounted for over half of the manufacturing employment in the city and 16 percent of all jobs.³¹ Other manufacturing industries each employed only a small fraction of the city’s blue-collar workers, but some, by any standard other than New York’s, were themselves large: electrical equipment and supplies (52,600 employees in 1950), nonelectrical machinery (31,800 employees), chemicals and allied products (42,300 employees), and leather and leather products (37,400 employees).³²

Across this spectrum of manufacturing were some common characteristics that distinguished New York City from other centers of goods produc-

tion. One was the small size of the typical establishment. In 1947 manufacturing establishments in the city employed an average of twenty-five workers, less than half the national average of fifty-nine. Counting only production workers, city manufacturing shops averaged twenty workers.³³

This low average reflected the rarity of large factories. One 1947 survey located only 348 plants with 500 or more workers in the entire New York–northeastern New Jersey metropolitan area, with most outside the city proper. It also reflected the presence of a vast number of tiny enterprises. Half the metropolitan-area manufacturing establishments had fewer than ten employees. In the city proper, 11,773 had fewer than four employees, including a quarter of all the garment shops and a third of all printing and publishing establishments.³⁴

The smallness of New York manufacturing enterprises was not simply a matter of industrial mix. The industries most heavily represented in New York tended toward small-scale operation, but even within given industries New York shops generally were smaller than their counterparts elsewhere. The average New York garment shop, for example, had only twenty employees (including seventeen production workers), in contrast to the national industry average of thirty-five. Nonelectrical machinery shops employed an average of eighty-six workers nationally, but only twenty-eight in New York. Household furniture makers averaged forty-seven workers nationally, eighteen in New York. Printing and publishing was something of an exception: the average New York establishment was considerably larger than those elsewhere. But this was because New York was a major center for white-collar publishing jobs; if only production workers are compared, the difference becomes negligible.³⁵

The scarcity of land, its high cost, and zoning regulations limited New York City factory size.³⁶ But more basic was the concentration of New York firms on custom or “small batch” production. Most New Yorkers who manufactured things either made one-of-a-kind products, such as fine jewelry or specialized machinery, or items such as blouses or stock certificates that were produced in only modest quantities in any particular style, size, or version. Although custom or small batch manufacturing was not necessarily small-scale—shipbuilding, for example, except in wartime, was a made-to-order business—in general establishments that made nonstandard goods were smaller than mass production facilities.³⁷

The New York region had some mass production plants, mostly outside the city. Typically these utilized a very detailed division of labor, a high de-

gree of mechanization, many special purpose machines, the mechanical transfer of goods along a sequential path of assembly, work pacing through assembly line timing or other technical means, and a high ratio of semiskilled operatives to skilled workers. Right across the Hudson River from Manhattan, for example, in Edgewater, N.J., sat an assembly plant of the Ford Motor Company, the firm that had virtually invented mass production (originally known as "Fordism"). Its rival, General Motors, had assembly plants in nearby Tarrytown, N.Y., and Linden, N.J. Westinghouse and General Electric employed over thirteen thousand workers in the New York area, mostly in northern New Jersey, many in mass production processes. Even in Manhattan there was some mass production. Emerson Electric Company made radios and televisions on the West Side until 1950, when it moved its operation to Jersey City. Benson and Hedges had a cigarette factory on Water Street. But such plants were the exception, not the rule, together employing only a small minority of New York's manufacturing workers.³⁸

Firms doing custom or small-batch production—more typical of New York manufacturing—generally had a less developed division of labor, used less specialized equipment, and employed more highly skilled and versatile workers than mass production companies. They also tended to use nontechnical means to set the pace of work, such as piecework (which was widespread in the garment industry). However, there were wide variations among such firms, even when making similar products. After World War II, for example, a growing number of garment shops abandoned traditional "tailor work" for "section work," which entailed a more extensive division of labor and required a less-skilled workforce. Still, in 1950 there were almost as many skilled blue-collar workers in New York City as there were semiskilled manufacturing workers, while in Flint, Michigan, the center of General Motors' mass production empire, there were only about half as many.³⁹

Versatility—as much or more than low unit price—was a key to success in New York manufacturing. In some cases versatility was a trait of individual businesses. In other cases it was a trait of constellations of firms, each of which in itself might be quite specialized. For example, the apparel industry was not really one industry but many: women's dresses, women's blouses, men's and boys' suits and coats, children's dresses, millinery, fur, corsets, knitted outerwear, men's neckwear, and so on. Within each of these sectors were jobbers, who designed and sold apparel and sometimes cut the needed material; contractors, who made apparel from material and specifications given them by others; and manufacturers, who performed both functions.

Contracting was more prevalent in New York than in smaller apparel centers, where manufacturers were more prominent. Its great advantage was the flexibility it provided in a seasonal, boom-bust industry dependent on the vagaries of fashion. Rather than having to maintain manufacturing facilities and a workforce sufficient to meet peak needs, jobbers made samples and then, based on orders actually received, contracted for most or all of the production. Contractors, in turn, tried to ensure steady business by developing relationships with many jobbers.⁴⁰

Contracting allowed even small companies to produce a vast array of styles of apparel by dealing with highly specialized firms that marbled the industry. If embroidered blouses became fashionable one season, for example, jobbers and manufacturers, who might not know how or be able to afford to set up their own embroidery operations, could send work out to specialized embroidery firms, which at other times might work on bedspreads or skirts.

Many types of firms supplied, serviced, and profited off of the apparel industry. There were button companies; sewing machine dealers; factors and bankers; truckers; textile, thread, and box suppliers; and fashion models and salespeople (since New York was the industry's sales as well as manufacturing center). These ancillary industries made it possible for apparel makers to start up with minimal capital and avoid large investments in equipment, space, or supplies.⁴¹

For manufacturers to be able to make use of what economists call "external economies"—wholesalers, subcontractors, and service firms performing functions that otherwise would have to be done in-house—they needed to be close together to allow the cheap, rapid transfer of material and frequent face-to-face communication to deal with the problems that inevitably arise when new products are made.⁴² This was why New York manufacturers tended to congregate in compact industrial districts. An astounding half million manufacturing jobs were clustered in Manhattan south of Central Park. These constituted over half the manufacturing jobs in New York City and well over a quarter of those in the twenty-two-county metropolitan region. Manhattan had more manufacturing jobs than any other county in the country, with the exception of Cook County, which contains Chicago and its suburbs.⁴³

Some sections of Manhattan housed manufacturing of all kinds, for example the area known as the Valley before being dubbed SoHo. But more typically, particular industries clustered in particular neighborhoods. The garment district—the center of women's and children's clothing design, sales, and manufacture—occupied eighteen blocks of loft buildings bounded

by 34th and 40th Streets and Sixth and Ninth Avenues. The fur district was nearby. So was the millinery industry, which was so concentrated that 15 percent of the country's entire millinery output came from a single building at 65 West 39th Street. Men's clothing was made between 14th and 26th Streets, while undergarment manufacturing took place downtown, along lower Broadway.⁴⁴

Commercial printing operations clustered in several Manhattan districts. Those that specialized in financial and legal printing congregated near City Hall; those that served the retail trade and bulk mailers settled in the West 30s, near the main post office; and those that serviced the advertising industry and corporate headquarters positioned themselves on the East Side above 42nd Street. Generally these shops were small and did work requiring close consultation with customers, short production runs, or fast delivery. They subcontracted out much of their typesetting, photoengraving, and binding, and depended on nearby type, ink, and paper houses to enable them to create products of almost every conceivable design and color without having to maintain large stores of supplies. Some large printing companies had plants in Long Island City, the Bronx, or Newark, where land was cheaper than in Manhattan but still near enough to allow customer contact.⁴⁵

The Queens and Brooklyn shores of the East River and the Inner Harbor lodged a whole series of industrial neighborhoods—Long Island City, Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bush Terminal. Along Newtown Creek, on the Brooklyn-Queens border, were Maspeth and Woodside. Many establishments in these areas required water access or large sites or engaged in noxious activities, for example, shipyards, chemical processing plants, and sugar, oil, and copper refineries. But there were numerous food processing, machine building, box making, furniture, paint, and electronics plants in these areas as well. Meat processing plants sat on the West Side of Manhattan, while slaughterhouses and tanneries bunched in Turtle Bay on the East Side until the United Nations displaced them.⁴⁶

Of course, not only manufacturing firms clustered in specialized districts. There was an insurance district, a diamond center, a wholesale flower district, several wholesale food districts, a leather district, and booksellers' row (the center of the used book trade). Wall Street was synonymous with finance; Madison Avenue with advertising.⁴⁷

The industrial geography of New York, divided as it was into specialized economic zones, imparted a particular character to the city's economic life, labor relations, and even its culture. Areas like the garment district or the dia-

mond district were chock-full of restaurants, cafeterias, bars, clubs, employment agencies, and union halls where employers and workers exchanged information, sought work or workers, socialized, organized, and developed shared ideas about life, work, and politics. Managers and workers—even owners—often identified more with their trade than with a particular company. The constant exchange of ideas, techniques, and personnel within industrial districts helped generate, attract, and retain firms that survived through flexibility. Any thing, person, or idea that a company might need to make a particular product usually could be found nearby. But while the industrial districts provided economic advantages for custom and small-batch producers, they had disadvantages for bulk producers.⁴⁸

It was almost a rule of New York manufacturing that as soon as a product became standardized and began to be sold in large quantities, its production was moved out of the city, and often out of the region entirely. Companies engaged in predictable, high-volume production of standard goods did not need the external economies that industrial districts provided: they could afford to have specialized in-house services, maintenance operations, and extensive inventories of supplies. Also, as production became routinized, they no longer needed access to a large pool of skilled workers. For firms that competed on the basis of price rather than the uniqueness of their products, speed of delivery, or quality of workmanship, the high unionization rate and high costs of labor, land, rent, taxes, energy, and shipping in New York became significant locational disadvantages.⁴⁹

Take electronics. Since the days of Thomas Edison, New York was a pioneer in the development and manufacture of electric and electronic components and equipment. In their early stages of development, making these products required the close collaboration of scientists, engineers, and highly skilled workers, all of whom could be found in large numbers in New York. But with standardization, jobs moved away. The city had been an early center of electronic tube manufacture. However, once tubes were no longer made in small batches by skilled craft workers (usually men) but on assembly lines by less-skilled workers (usually women), companies moved their operations to New Jersey and beyond, where they could find cheaper space, better rail connections, and lower-cost labor. Similarly, until the mid-1920s, New York was a major center of radio manufacturing, generally by small firms, but as radios became standardized, larger firms with larger factories became dominant, and the industry began moving elsewhere.⁵⁰

The disadvantages of the New York area—especially the city proper—

for mass production meant that the region was significantly underrepresented in the industries that grew most rapidly during the first four decades of the twentieth century, including the automobile, petroleum, and rubber industries. New York was largely a bystander as a giant complex of industries developed to manufacture, fuel, and otherwise accommodate motor vehicles, a complex which at its height employed one out of every six American workers. In short, New York was a non-Fordist city during the age of Ford. This was true on the level of consumption as well as production: in 1950 there was one car in New York City for every 6.9 residents, in contrast to one for every 3.8 people nationally.⁵¹

New York's manufacturing sector of 1945 in some respects looked more like its manufacturing sector of 1845 than contemporaneous centers of mass production like Pittsburgh or Detroit. The concentration on consumer non-durables; the crowded industrial districts, with their loft buildings and tiny workshops; the webs of contractors and subcontractors; and the persistence, at least in some trades, of highly skilled craftsmen working alongside less skilled and more poorly paid operatives—all of which characterized blue-collar New York at the end of World War II—bear an uncanny resemblance to industrial New York a century earlier.⁵² But the New York manufacturing economy of 1945 was not simply atavistic; while it contained many archaic elements, it also had some strikingly advanced ones.

Electronics components again furnish a good example. While it was true that by 1954 *standardized* tube production had largely left the region, non-standard tube production had not. In fact, more area workers than ever before—some twelve thousand—were making tubes, generally specialized, highly sophisticated devices. A similar situation prevailed in electronic end-products. After World War II, New York was not a major center for mass market consumer electronics, but it was for scientific, industrial, and military electronics, which tended to be the cutting edge of the industry. Some of this work was done in New York City proper—during the 1940s, for example, several companies made radar devices in the city—but increasingly it was concentrated on Long Island, which also was a major center for military aircraft production.⁵³

The manufacture of diverse products in short production runs using versatile equipment and personnel—what some economists call “flexible specialization”—was neither less modern than mass production nor inevitably doomed by it. Rather, it was an alternative system that, depending on the product involved and the particular economic, social, and political circum-

stances, might be more or less efficient and more or less profitable than mass production. For workers, it had both advantages and disadvantages.⁵⁴

Many workers found flexible production jobs more rewarding than Fordist production. Machinists making complex equipment, for example, faced an ever-varying series of challenges that called for skill, experience, and ingenuity. Cutters in the apparel industry had to mobilize dexterity, strength, and know-how to maximize the number of garments that could be made from a given stock of material. But diversity of product did not necessarily mean challenging work. A lathe operator in a furniture factory might help produce small batches of furniture in varied sizes and styles, but if a separate setup man prepared the lathe for each new run, as was often the case, the lathe operator experienced little difference between making numerous identical parts (Fordism) or small batches of different parts (flexible specialization). Likewise, while blouse or skirt styles might radically change from year to year, the tasks of a sewing machine operator under the section work system remained essentially the same, day after day, year after year.⁵⁵

Many small New York manufacturers were technically primitive. The typical New York dress or blouse company during the mid-1950s was capitalized at only about twenty-five thousand dollars. Few could afford to buy advanced equipment or experiment with new methods. Many small manufacturers survived only by squeezing labor as hard as possible. The small firm size, continual search for credit, intense competition, rocky labor relations, and need for timely deliveries characteristic of so much New York manufacturing opened the door for organized crime, which played a major role in clothing, paper box, leather goods, and a number of other industries.⁵⁶

Short lead times and small production runs often meant seasonal employment. Production of fur garments and women's clothing, for instance, was keyed to annual selling seasons. In 1950, operators in the women's coat and suit industry averaged only thirty-eight weeks of work in Manhattan and thirty-five in Brooklyn. The toy and cosmetics industries sold a large percentage of their annual output during the Christmas season; after holiday production came slack periods with extensive layoffs. Some workers, particularly women who were second breadwinners in their families, liked annual layoffs, when unemployment insurance, which in effect subsidized seasonal industries, gave them continuing if reduced income. But for many workers seasonal layoffs meant sojourns working out-of-town or in other industries, such as taxi-driving or longshoring, or severe economic hardship.⁵⁷

Which workers experienced the positive side of flexible specialization and which the negative depended in part on gender and ethnicity. Apparel cutters, for example, were almost exclusively men and, except in poorly paid, nonunion “cut-up shops,” almost exclusively white: Jews and Italians in clothing, Jews and Greeks in fur. Section work, by contrast, was largely done by women, in the postwar decades mainly Jews, Italians, and Puerto Ricans.⁵⁸

In 1947 women made up 38 percent of the manufacturing production workers in New York City (compared to 26 percent nationally), including 56 percent of those in the apparel industry. Among men there were two skilled blue-collar workers (in 1950) for every semi-skilled manufacturing operative, but among women there were *nineteen* operatives for every worker in a skilled blue-collar job. Although government skill classifications do not always correspond to actual job content, clearly there were radically different occupational structures for men and women. This contributed to a huge disparity in remuneration: in 1947 male manufacturing production workers in New York City earned a weekly average of \$67.58, women an average of \$42.92.⁵⁹

The tendency for flexible production and inequitable labor market segmentation to go hand in hand was even more evident in construction than manufacturing. Like the apparel industry, the construction industry maintained a high degree of flexibility through the extensive use of subcontracting. Its workers produced custom or semi-custom products, which continually presented new problems that could be solved only by drawing on training, past experience, and a creative cast of mind. Of the 144,000 New Yorkers who worked in the construction industry in 1950 (including in office jobs), fewer than 4 percent were women. Furthermore, the industry was overwhelmingly white (in a city that was over 9 percent African-American), with nonwhite workers largely restricted to positions as laborers or hod carriers. Many trades had literally no journeymen who were not white men.⁶⁰

In postwar New York, then, the world of the versatile, all-around, highly-skilled industrial worker still flourished, largely as a result of a concentration on flexible production. But it did so, essentially, just for white men. Most female and nonwhite workers, and many white men as well, inhabited a world of subdivided, semiskilled labor. For them, the difference between batch and bulk production mattered little in their daily tasks.

Manufacturing was just one part—though the largest—of the goods production and distribution complex at the heart of the city’s economy. In the early

nineteenth century, New York rose to national dominance not as a manufacturing center but as a commercial hub. New York's superb natural harbor and its links westward via the Erie Canal and, later, several trunk railroads made it an ideal entry and egress point for goods and people. Much of the city's manufacturing sector arose as an adjunct to trade: building ships and barrels for transporting goods, providing luxury items to the merchant elite, and processing trade commodities, such as raw sugar.

By the mid-twentieth century, manufacturing had come to dwarf trade as a source of employment. But New York's port—by far the largest and most important in the nation—still was vital to the city's economy. In the late 1940s, one-fifth by weight and one-third by value of the country's maritime imports and exports went through New York.

The Port of New York was vast; within a twenty-five mile radius from the Statue of Liberty nestled more than 750 miles of developed shoreline. During the immediate postwar years, the New Jersey side of the Hudson housed cargo handling facilities in Port Newark, Jersey City, and Hoboken, but most of the port's cargo—75 percent as late as 1960—was handled in New York City. The West Side of Manhattan had the greatest concentration of deep-water general cargo piers in the world. It also housed most of the port's passenger ship facilities. In Brooklyn, miles of docks, warehouses, and shipyards lined the shore. Staten Island had more of the same, on a more modest scale. Extensive lighterage and carfloat operations crisscrossed the harbor and the rivers that flowed into it, compensating for the poor rail connections between various parts of the port, particularly between New York City and the Jersey railheads.⁶¹

Local officials estimated that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, 400,000 workers were dependent on port activities. About a quarter were directly involved in marine transportation, including 14,000 sailors and deckhands and 36,000 longshoremen. Another 40,000 worked in port-related trucking, railroad, and warehouse operations, and over 30,000 in ship construction and repair. The rest worked for import-export firms, in foreign banking, marine insurance, or admiralty law, or in material handling, refining, and manufacturing operations closely tied to the port.⁶²

The flow of goods, people, and ideas through the port gave working-class New York an unusual worldliness. Sailors returned from sea with first-hand accounts of the rise and fall of fascism, the devastation of World War II, the turmoil in the colonial world, the spread of Communism, the outbreak of the Cold War. Mere proximity to the waterfront brought whiffs of exotica.

From his days in Brooklyn Heights, Truman Capote remembered seeing “Crane-carried tractors and cotton bales and unhappy cattle sway above ships bound for Bahia, for Bremen, for ports spelling their names in Oriental calligraphy.” Foreign sailors drank and talked with the longshoremen, truckers, and native seamen who frequented the bars and flophouses on the perimeter of the port. The port made New York the country’s great immigrant city, a city of unparalleled human diversity. An entrepôt from its founding, mid-twentieth-century New York had strands running through its port connecting it to places, people, and ideas truly foreign to most of America.⁶³

Distributive activities, of course, were not restricted to the harbor. In 1948, New York City had over 35,000 wholesale establishments, employing 315,000 workers. One-fifth of the wholesale trade of the entire country took place in New York, and in many product lines the majority of all sales took place there.

As one would expect, there was great variety within this vast landscape of buying and selling, which included everything from Manhattan’s famed Fulton Fish Market to national sales offices of giant manufacturers. Mostly, though, the field consisted of highly competitive small shops. Over half the wholesale establishments in the city had three or fewer employees; fewer than five hundred had one hundred employees or more. In part because most shops were small, there was unusually close contact between white- and blue-collar workers. A typical wholesaler might have buyers, salesmen, clerical workers, warehouse employees, and processing workers all in the same location. Women, who held most of the clerical positions, made up a quarter of the wholesale workforce.⁶⁴

Wholesale trade had a culture of fast talk and sharp deals. Top salesmen could earn a very good living. But for most workers, wholesaling was the “measly manner of existence” that Biff Loman described in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). “To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella.”⁶⁵

Retail trade could be worse. In 1948, New York City had an astounding 104,000 retail establishments, one for every seventy-six residents. Over a half million New Yorkers worked in retail trade. Roughly 10 percent were employed by department stores, which housed some of the largest congregations of workers in the city. In 1947 twenty-one department stores and

fifty-one other retail establishments employed at least five hundred workers. At the other extreme were the tens of thousands of neighborhood groceries, butcher shops, vegetable stands, pharmacies, and candy stores, many tiny family operations. The nearly one hundred thousand “active proprietors of unincorporated businesses” in the retail sector included numerous members of what C. Wright Mills called “the lumpen-bourgeoisie,” earning at best a modest income by working physically exhausting and emotionally deadening hours and exploiting their own family members. (Bernard Malamud captured the cramped agony of this life in his novel *The Assistant*.) Also in retail trade were 134,000 New Yorkers who worked in the city’s more than 18,000 “eating and drinking places.”⁶⁶

As important as goods production and distribution was to New York (in 1950 it accounted for three out of five jobs), it was in *relative* decline during the postwar years. Another economy, which operated alongside it, though smaller when World War II ended, grew over the following decades. It consisted of the finance, government, and service industries. Rather than dealing in tangible goods like ships, cookies, or corsets, this world centered around intangible forms of property, such as insurance and stock; on the creation of rules; and on the provision of services.⁶⁷

The centrality of administrative and service industries to the local economy stemmed, in part, from the city’s world position. By 1945, New York was, as historian Thomas McCormick put it, the “central metropolis” of the capitalist world system, the “dominant city that acts as the coordinating point and clearing house of international capital.”⁶⁸ As the center of international finance and headquarters of 140 of the nation’s 500 largest industrial corporations, New York was the site of unprecedented economic power.⁶⁹ The leading local businessmen were the most important economic decision-makers in the world. What they decided, and what happened on local financial and commodity markets, affected the lives of billions of people.

In 1950, 242,000 New Yorkers—7.4 percent of the employed workforce—worked in finance, insurance, and real estate. What most people meant when they said Wall Street—securities firms, commodity brokers, investment companies, and the stock and commodity exchanges—employed surprisingly few workers, under 30,000. Banks had twice and real estate firms over three times that number on payroll. The insurance industry employed 76,000 New Yorkers, the majority women. In the late 1950s, Metropolitan Life alone had 15,000 workers at its home office on Madison Square, dwarf-

ing any local manufacturing enterprise. Such massing of white-collar workers, most doing routinized work, was not unusual. The images of the emergence of mass society in New York—for example, in King Vidor's brilliant 1928 movie *The Crowd*—were not of workers on an assembly line but of rows and rows of clerical workers engaged in seemingly mindless, interchangeable, soul-deadening labor.⁷⁰

Over 580,000 New Yorkers worked in service industries, a catchall category for enterprises that did not primarily make things. They ranged from teachers and hospital workers to employees of advertising agencies, automobile repair shops, and corporate law firms. Women constituted the majority of professional and personal service workers; men dominated entertainment, business, and repair services. Because New York was a culture capital, it had an unusually large number of men and women who provided “entertainment and related services,” 50,000 according to the 1950 census. Nearly a quarter of a million people provided “personal services.” They included 75,000 women and 4,000 men who reported their occupation as private household worker, a quarter of whom lived with their employer. A much larger number of New Yorkers—1.7 million, 99.7 percent of whom were women—reported their occupation as “keeping house.” However, because they were keeping their *own* houses, and not receiving wages for doing so, statisticians did not consider them part of the labor force.⁷¹

Finally, in 1950, 87,000 New Yorkers worked for the federal government (just over half were postal workers), 9,000 for the state government, and over 220,000 for the municipal government, which was, by far, the city's largest single employer.⁷²

The sheer size of New York, and the complexity of twentieth-century life, meant that at the end of World War II the great metropolis's economy was extraordinary in scope and diversity. Yet compared to a half-century later, the degree to which its diverse parts were physically and socially integrated is striking. Take a look at the wonderful photographs by Andreas Feininger of New York during the 1940s.⁷³ Over and over again his images include both soaring office towers, where power and paper were manipulated, and gritty work sites where blue-collar labor took place. In the 1940s it was almost impossible to look out of a skyscraper window and not see men engaged in physical labor, be it pushing racks of clothes in the garment district, floating railroad cars across the harbor, or maneuvering trucks full of printed material, toys, or machine tools through the congested streets of Manhattan. When

financiers and lawyers and marketing men left their offices they rubbed shoulders in the streets and subways with the secretaries and clerks and elevator operators with whom they shared their buildings and the furriers and typographers and waitresses and warehousemen who worked nearby.

At the midpoint of the twentieth century, to a far greater extent than at its end, producing, distributing, selling, and financing goods and services were, in New York, geographically proximate processes. Clothes were often designed, modeled, sold, financed, made, and distributed all from the same building. In the early days of television not only were the network's financial and administrative offices located in New York City, most of their shows were produced there as well. New York-area television stations and advertising agencies employed thousands of performers, authors, directors, producers, and scenic workers. Nearby, over 6,000 workers made television sets or their components, 10,500 workers sold them, and 5,000 mechanics serviced them.⁷⁴

The long-run history of capitalism entails the abstraction of value out of and away from the labor process, separating mental labor from manual labor and the circulation of money from the distribution of things. Central to the story of postwar New York were the different fates of goods production and symbol manipulation. In 1945 a bifurcation of the economy already was evident. Still, just blocks from Wall Street, where paper symbols of property—securities, bonds, and commodity futures—were traded, there were wholesale markets for butter, eggs, cheese, tea, coffee, and spices where not just the ownership of those goods but the goods themselves were exchanged. As the postwar era dawned, the sounds of tugboats and the smell of freshly-roasted coffee beans still penetrated the corridors where bankers and businessmen accumulated money and power on a scale unsurpassed anywhere in the world.⁷⁵

CHAPTER 2.

Working-Class New York

From the 1920s through the 1970s, in literature, scholarship, and reportage about work and industrial relations, automobile workers often were held forth as the archetypical proletarians. Most worked in the giant factories and on the assembly lines that artists, academics, and journalists associated with modernity. For many Americans, the United Automobile Workers (UAW), which helped set the national pattern for wages and benefits, epitomized the labor movement.¹ But in the realm of workers' culture and home life—workers away from work—the national media were more likely to portray a New Yorker, and typically not a factory worker, than an auto worker from Detroit or Cleveland.

Probably the best-known working-class families of the 1950s were the fictional Kramdens and Nortons of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, whose domestic doings and comic misadventures kept *The Honeymooners* near the top of the television ratings for eight years. Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden drove a bus on Madison Avenue, while Art Carney's Ed Norton was a sewer worker, occupations that had little to do with the heroic image of the proletarian so popular among leftists and liberals.²

The Kramdens and Nortons were everymen, whose struggle for dignity and to keep their heads above water (in Ed's case literally) had universal meaning. Because New York was an entertainment and literary center, it was natural that New York workers were used as representatives of the common man. Yet in some respects the Kramdens and Nortons were distinctly New Yorkers. Where else did neighbors visit one another via the fire escape?

In the metaphorical device used to project the pluralist vision of the nation which came to the fore during the 1940s, the small group of diverse characters forced to work together for their mutual survival (the platoon or the survivors of a shipwreck), the working-class New Yorker (usually a Brooklynite) was one of the stock characters, along with the Appalachian, the upper-class WASP, and the Midwestern farm boy. Who could forget William Bendix dying in *Lifeboat* (1944), with his last, delirious thoughts of the Brooklyn Dodgers and dancing at Roseland? In images of mid-century America, working-class New Yorkers were portrayed as their own ethnic group, full of idiosyncrasies that set them off from the rest of America.³

New York's peculiar economy, demography, and social geography, and its status as a national and world center, gave its working class a distinctive character. In the years after World War II, that distinctiveness led and enabled working-class New Yorkers to push their city along a path of development unlike that of the most of the country.

To speak thus of a working class, of course, is to assume that workers and their families had enough in common with one another to make them a recognizable social entity. In postwar New York that was indeed the case. As a result of the kinds of jobs they had, workers lived in particular places and in particular ways, shared common experiences and similar constraints, and developed like ways of understanding the world. Economic class alone did not define their sense of self, or that of their families. Ethnic, racial, and religious identifications were powerful. Divisions along lines of occupation, politics, and sensibility arose, too. But at least episodically, a sense of class became unmistakably evident among New York workers and their families.

Never was that more so than during the post-World War II strike wave, which was notable not only for its scale but for the spirit of solidarity that accompanied it. The widespread refusal of workers to cross picket lines exemplified this. So did the participation of nonstriking workers in picket lines and protests supporting strikers. Mario Russo, killed in the Phelps Dodge strike, belonged to a union local that itself was not party to the conflict. When during the May 1946 railroad strike President Truman called for a law allowing him to draft strikers, thousands of New York workers rallied on twenty-four hours notice to protest the measure. And in October 1946, after *New York Times* columnist Hanson W. Baldwin accused unions of undermining the merchant marine and denigrated the wartime service of merchant seamen, three thousand workers picketed the newspaper, leading it to all but repudiate Baldwin and run a lengthy statement by the protesters.⁴

Workers made considerable financial sacrifices on one another's behalf. Some unions, like the United Electrical Workers (UE), did not have strike funds, leaving them dependent on contributions from their members, other unions, and the public to provide relief for strikers. During the 1946 electrical industry strike, UE Local 475, based in Brooklyn, and Local 453, in Yonkers, together "adopted" a local of workers on strike at a Westinghouse elevator plant in Jersey City, sending over caravans loaded with food as well as contributing cash.⁵ In late 1945, local unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) established a Joint CIO Strike Support

Committee. Under its auspices, four thousand unionists contributed three tons of food and toys for striking General Motors workers.⁶

The size of the postwar strikes, their near or actual simultaneity, and acts of solidarity among workers gave the strike wave the look of a class movement. In reality, it was not a coordinated, class-wide movement. A spirit of camaraderie and class solidarity was widespread, but most strikes were discrete struggles by particular groups for specific contractual arrangements. Sometimes workers fought one another. During the Phelps Dodge strike, some of the scabs at the Elizabeth plant belonged to the AFL's International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which was battling with UE—the CIO union which represented the strikers—to organize New York's small and midsized electrical manufacturing shops.⁷

New York workers could be remarkably combative during the mid and late 1940s. They tended to be most militant when on the defensive, when companies like Phelps Dodge seemed determined to break their unions or roll back prior gains. Unions rarely sought radical departures from established patterns of industrial or social relations. But when faced with recalcitrant bosses, time after time workers stood up for one another.⁸

Tension between solidarity and division, militance and accommodation, and parochialism and cosmopolitanism structured working-class New York. These oppositions were not unique to the city. But as a result of New York's peculiarities, they played out differently there than elsewhere.

Part of what was distinctive about New York's working class was its foreignness. When World War II ended, New York was a city of immigrants and their children. In 1950 foreign-stock (first and second generation) whites made up a majority of the city population and nearly two-thirds of those of prime working age (twenty to sixty-four). As late as the mid-1950s, John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells have noted, "blue collar white ethnics were the single largest social stratum" in New York City.⁹

The size of New York's foreign-stock population and its composition—primarily Italians, Eastern European Jews, Germans, and Irish—gave the city a unique religious profile. A 1952 survey found that nearly half of all New Yorkers were Catholic and over a quarter Jewish. Among whites, Protestants made up just 16 percent of the population. Rare have been the times and places in United States history when Protestants have ranked so low among religious groups.

The huge size of the Catholic and Jewish populations—New York

housed the largest concentration of Jews ever to assemble, at any place, in any era—gave the city much of its cultural particularity and contributed to the widely shared sense, among both New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers, that New York was in the United States but not of it. Norman Podhoretz recalled that growing up in working-class Brownsville, he never “thought of myself as an American. I came from Brooklyn, and in Brooklyn there were no Americans; there were Jews and Negroes and Italians and Poles and Irishmen. Americans lived in New England, in the South, in the Midwest: alien people in alien places.”¹⁰ The sense of not being part of America often had a contemptuous edge, from the *New Yorker* advertising slogan of the 1920s, “not for the old lady in Dubuque,” to Woody Allen’s joke about California in *Annie Hall*, that he could not live in a place whose main contribution to culture was the right turn on red. In Thomas McGrath’s novel about the 1945 longshoremen’s strike, *This Coffin Has No Handles*, a midwestern soldier disembarking in the city says to his buddy, “I don’t like New York. It’s just another foreign country.” His friend, from the West Side of Manhattan, replies, “Maybe it is a foreign country. I always figured Hoboken was the West Coast, myself,” a sentiment that brought fame to Saul Steinberg, whose satirical drawing, “New Yorker’s View of the World,” became a classic.¹¹

The foreign-born were not the only newcomers to the city. In 1940 there were 641,000 whites born somewhere in the continental United States other than New York State living in the city. Their number declined to 492,000 in 1960. By contrast, there was a net in-migration of 221,000 African-Americans during the 1940s and 154,000 during the 1950s.¹² Those same years also saw a massive movement of people from Puerto Rico to New York. During each year in the 1950s an average of 41,000 more Puerto Ricans moved to the mainland than returned to the island, with most settling in New York. By 1960, 613,000 New Yorkers—almost 8 percent of the population—either had been born in Puerto Rico or had a parent born there.¹³

Many observers contended that what made New York special was that so many of its residents had made a conscious choice to move there. E. B. White, in his 1949 celebration *Here Is New York*, wrote that there were “roughly three New Yorks. . . . the New York of the man or woman who was born here. . . . the New York of the commuter. . . . [and] the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something.” White believed that each contributed to the character of the metropolis, but it was the “settlers” who made the city great, who gave it

“passion,” its “high-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements.”¹⁴

White was in a long tradition of hailing New York as a city of newcomers, a self-selected congregation of the fearless and energetic, arriving from all over the world to make their fortunes. The demographic reality was more complex. In 1950, 4.8 million of New York’s 7.9 million residents had been born in the city. To the extent that New York was a magnet, its polarity reversed during the 1940s. That decade roughly one-tenth of the municipal population chose to leave. For the first time in modern history more people moved out of New York than moved in, a trend that accelerated during the 1950s. Only natural increase kept the population stable.¹⁵

Among the foreign-stock population, immigrants were a minority, outnumbered by their children. Furthermore, they were an aging group: while in 1950 foreign-born whites made up 23 percent of the city’s population, they constituted only 2 percent of those under age twenty and 61 percent of those sixty-five and over.¹⁶

Immigrants still wielded great influence. New York’s first two postwar mayors, William O’Dwyer and Vincent Impellitteri, had been born abroad. Into the 1950s an extensive web of immigrant-built institutions remained largely intact, from the “national” Catholic parishes, such as the Irish, Italian, Polish, and Croatian churches on Manhattan’s West Side, to the nearly two thousand *landsmanshaftn* (fraternal societies of Jewish immigrants from the same hometown). When in 1948 the Board of Transportation raised subway and bus fares, it advertised the changes in English, Italian, Russian, Greek, Yiddish, Spanish, German, Polish, and Hungarian language newspapers.¹⁷

In the postwar era, however, it was the children of immigrants, more than immigrants themselves, who set the cultural tone of the city and established its image for the rest of the country, be it television comedians like Jackie Gleason (whose parents were Irish-born) and Sid Caesar (son of a Polish-born father and Russian-born mother) or “New York intellectuals,” like Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, and Norman Podhoretz (all children of working-class, Eastern European Jews). Such children of immigrants were of two worlds. On the one hand, they usually were at least familiar with the language, culture, and values their parents brought with them from their native lands. On the other hand, the United States—and more particularly New York—was their home; its streets, jobs, games, language, and values were assumed norms. The drive, uncertainty, and pain of this transitional generation have been central themes of modern American literature. More than any-

where else, New York was the arena in which this story of two generations and two cultures played itself out.¹⁸

Joining the children of immigrants as a growing presence in the city were blacks and Puerto Ricans. Their arrival was linked to the success of second-generation immigrants in escaping the working class, or at least moving into skilled positions within it, creating a labor shortage in low-wage manufacturing and service jobs. Most African-Americans who moved to New York came from the South, particularly the Carolinas, Virginia, and Georgia, seeking jobs and escape from limited economic opportunity, severe discrimination, and the threat of racial violence.¹⁹ Similarly, Puerto Ricans most frequently cited their desire to get a job in New York or to join a family member who had one as their reason for moving there. Employment per se was not the motive; most migrants who had wanted a job already had had one in Puerto Rico, where, occupation by occupation, unemployment was generally lower than in New York during the years of peak movement. But new arrivals typically doubled their island income as soon as they found a job in New York. By 1959, the median family income of Puerto Ricans in New York was three times what it was in Puerto Rico.²⁰

The wartime and postwar increase in the Puerto Rican and African-American population of New York, historian Oscar Handlin noted, was “comparable in scale to that of the Irish and Germans between 1840 and 1860 and of the Jews and Italians, 1890-1915.”²¹ Unlike earlier immigration, however, the influx of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans did not swell the total population of the city, because of a simultaneous, massive outmigration of whites. Between 1940 and 1970, the non-Puerto Rican white population of New York fell from roughly seven million to five million, largely due to suburbanization.

In the postwar years, the suburban counties surrounding New York boomed. Workers formed a significant element of the outward flow. Even before the end of World War II, New York newspapers were carrying ads for modestly-priced homes in Nassau County requiring no down payments for veterans. Starting in the 1960s, in addition to the exodus to nearby suburbs, a growing number of New Yorkers (including many retirees) headed to other parts of the country.²²

Postwar working-class New York was not stable. Neighborhoods, unions, political parties, governmental agencies, and cultural institutions faced major, sometimes rapid, shifts in their makeup or constituencies. How

they dealt with the process of population change helped determine how the city developed during the decades after World War II.

With so many New Yorkers born elsewhere or raised by parents who were, ethnicity loomed large in the life of the city. In the 1940s and 1950s, most working-class New Yorkers lived in neighborhoods that had a distinctly ethnic flavor: Brooklyn's Sunset Park, for example, with its heavy concentration of Scandinavians, or Brownsville, Williamsburg, and Borough Park, Jewish neighborhoods in the same borough, or Harlem, with its African-American, Puerto Rican, and Italian enclaves, or Chinatown, then emerging as the largest concentration of Asians in the Western hemisphere. Greenpoint, Brooklyn was Polish; Yorkville, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, German, Irish, and Hungarian. Such clustering was to some extent voluntary. But it also resulted from discrimination. New York State did not outlaw discrimination in public housing until 1955, and in private, multi-unit dwellings until two years later. (Federal law did not ban housing discrimination until 1968.) African-Americans had little choice as to where they could live because realtors and building owners in most parts of the city would not sell or rent to them. Puerto Ricans, Jews, and Chinese faced similar, if less pervasive discrimination.

Ethnic neighborhoods had their own retail and entertainment districts, and some housed substantial industrial employment. Pitkin Avenue, the central commercial street of Brownsville, Alfred Kazin recalled, had "Banks, Woolworth's, classy shops, loan companies, Loew's Pitkin, the Yiddish Theater, the Little Oriental restaurant—except for Brownsville's ancestral stress in the food, the Yiddish Theater, the left wing–right wing arguments around the tables in Hoffman's Cafeteria, the Zionist appeals along the route, it might be Main Street in any moderately large town."²³

But of course what made Brownsville Brownsville were precisely the "ancestral stress in the food, the Yiddish Theater, the left wing–right wing arguments . . . the Zionist appeals." The concentration of people who shared the same language, history, and traditions reinforced ethnic identity on a daily basis. So did ethnically-based religious institutions: national Catholic churches, or the Pentecostal Puerto Rican churches in East Harlem and "El Bronx," or the storefront shuls that dotted poor Jewish neighborhoods, or the African-American churches, small or grand. And ethnic identity was reinforced by specialized neighborhood services, from kosher butchers to botanicas to storefront Italian social clubs.²⁴

In the memories and memoirs of working-class New Yorkers, the neigh-

borhood looms large. Many thought of themselves not as citizens of the nation or the city but of a particular neighborhood or block. "Each street was a village," recalled advertising executive Jerry Della Femina, son of a *New York Times* pressman, about Gravesend, the Italian neighborhood in South Brooklyn where he grew up during the 1940s.²⁵

The intensity of neighborhood attachment had a material basis. In New York, working people were far less likely to own their homes than elsewhere in the country, and far more likely to live in large rental apartment buildings. In 1950 only 8 percent of the dwelling units in the city were detached, single-family homes, compared to 17 percent in Chicago, 48 percent in Detroit, and 54 percent in Los Angeles. Fewer than 20 percent of New York residential buildings were owner-occupied. Nearly 40 percent had twenty or more units.

The fact that the New York working class did not own real property had important political implications. It meant, among other things, that New York workers had less interest in keeping down real estate taxes than workers elsewhere, and that homeowners associations were not a major political force within the working class. But the New York housing pattern had cultural and emotional implications as well. Dense population, small stuffy apartments, and shared hallways and stoops meant that life was exposed and often communal. Living on Harlem's 116th Street, thought Lutie Johnson, a character in Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*, was "like living in a tent with everything that goes on inside it open to the world because the flap won't close." "Crowded, contiguous ethnic neighborhoods," one historian of the Bronx noted, "allowed for the nurturing of community feeling and an intense street life—memories of which account for much nostalgia and idealization."²⁶

The thick ethnic air of working-class neighborhoods did not mean that they were homogeneous. Quite the opposite was true. Most "Jewish" neighborhoods, for example, had substantial non-Jewish populations. In some—like Williamsburg—Jews were actually a minority. Even in the most heavily Jewish neighborhoods, like Brownsville or Brighton Beach, a fifth to a third of the residents were Gentile. A similar situation prevailed in El Barrio—Spanish Harlem; Dan Wakefield, who lived in the neighborhood in the late 1950s, reported that "there is hardly a block . . . that does not have at least several families left from the older settlements of Jews, Irish or Italians." In Brooklyn, in 1950 only 35 percent of the black population lived in census tracts with over 80 percent black residents.

Neighborhood heterogeneity could be a transitory moment in the ragged process of ethnic succession: for example the transformation of Bushwick

and Ridgewood from predominantly German to predominantly Italian, or East New York from a largely white area to an African-American and Puerto Rican one. But sometimes there was long-lasting ethnic mixing, such as the generally peaceful cohabitation of Bensonhurst by Jews and Italians. Occasionally heterogeneity was a conscious choice. According to Deborah Dash Moore, many second-generation Jews liked having large numbers of non-Jews living amongst them or nearby because it allowed ethnic camaraderie without the sense of living in a ghetto.²⁷

Growing up in a neighborhood with a particular ethnic character, then, did not preclude ongoing, even intimate contact with those from different backgrounds. If anything, such contact was the norm. In *Family Installments*, for example, Edward Rivera recalls having Italian classmates and non-Hispanic teachers in his parochial school in Spanish Harlem. (Because of a severe shortage of Puerto Rican priests and a decision by Francis Cardinal Spellman not to establish national churches for Puerto Ricans, Puerto Rican Catholics were mainly served by non-Hispanic clergy.) Very often schools, especially junior high and high schools, which drew from large catchment areas, were sites for ethnic mixing.²⁸

Youth gangs demonstrated the complexities of ethnic loyalty. In the 1940s and 1950s such gangs were widespread and a source of considerable concern to public authorities. Almost invariably they were territorial. Often gangs were made up exclusively of members of a particular ethnic group, and some gang clashes had a distinct ethnic dimension. No New York gangs were more famous than the fictional Jets and Sharks of *West Side Story*, warring tribes of Italians and Puerto Ricans whose portrayal was based on actual conditions on the rapidly changing West Side of Manhattan. But gangs were not always ethnically constituted. The Enchanters, one of the most powerful East Harlem gangs of the early 1950s, with branches throughout the region, was largely Puerto Rican but had African-American and a few Italian members as well. Other East Harlem gangs also evolved from being strictly Italian or Puerto Rican to being multiethnic. "Racial and ethnic backgrounds," one official study concluded, "are not at the heart of gang strife."²⁹

Intricate patterns of ethnic segregation and mixing at work and at home reinforced one another. Workers in some industries tended to reside close to their jobs in neighborhoods that mirrored the ethnic composition of the industry workforce. Italian longshoremen, who dominated the Brooklyn docks, tended to live in Redhook and other harborside Brooklyn neighborhoods, the world Arthur Miller captured in *A View from the Bridge* (1955).

Many Scandinavian maritime workers lived in nearby Sunset Park. In Manhattan, many Irish longshoremen lived in Chelsea and worked in all-Irish gangs on nearby Hudson River piers. But other longshoremen working in the area were Italian or black and did not dwell nearby.³⁰ Some light manufacturing companies located their plants near poor neighborhoods to take advantage of a ready pool of women eager for work. They offered short work days and flexibility about absences to meet family obligations, but paid very low wages.³¹

Sometimes workers in a particular industry lived together but distant from their jobs. Jewish needle trades workers heavily populated neighborhoods such as Crotona, Kingsbridge, and Pelham Parkway in the Bronx and Williamsburg, Brownsville, and Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, areas that had good subway connections to the garment and fur districts. Unskilled black and Puerto Rican laborers with jobs in New Jersey or Long Island City tended to settle in upper Manhattan, not because of its convenience but because they were shut out of other areas by price or discrimination. Skilled, white, blue-collar workers preferred outer borough neighborhoods or suburbs that had affordable single-family housing. In 1940 they had a higher suburbanization rate than even professionals.³²

Such residential bunching by occupation deepened solidarities among workers and their families, contributing to class consciousness and the strength of the labor movement. Attitudes and identities formed at work spilled over into neighborhood life, and vice versa. The Brownsville Boys Club is an instructive example. The club was formed in 1940 when the Board of Education closed after-school recreation facilities to boys fourteen and over. Its founders were members of a Brownsville basketball team who organized a protest petition to the board. The leader of the group, sixteen-year-old Jacob Baroff, later remembered that "We were insulted, shocked. . . . We were angry about being shut out. We were innocent. We believed in democracy and rights."

The Brownsville Boys Club was a neighborhood group of youth who had little if any work experience, yet its existence was intimately linked to the experiences workers had as workers. As the club's historian, Gerald Sorin, wrote, "The fact that these second-generation Jewish boys were raised by immigrants who were often active in mutual-aid societies, unions, and progressive social and political organizations helps explain their emphasis on 'rights' and their proclivity for collective peer-group initiative and the organizational mode." Alfred Kazin, the son of a housepainter and a dressmaker, recalled

that he grew up in Brownsville with an “instinctive belief in class struggle.” It was this belief in class and class struggle, learned from working-class parents, that led Brownsville boys to see a battle for basketball courts as a struggle for rights. It prompted them to organize collectively and strive to transcend ethnic boundaries by recruiting African-Americans for their club.³³

The complex demography of neighborhoods and occupations spurred working-class New Yorkers to both embrace and transcend ethnic, racial, and religious loyalties. In many ways, New Yorkers were a remarkably parochial lot. Take Vito Marcantonio, the seven-term congressman from East Harlem. The son of a native-born Italian-American carpenter, Marcantonio grew up in an English-speaking household in Italian East Harlem, where he lived his entire life. In one spectacular way Marcantonio violated community norms: he married a Protestant New Englander. But in every other respect he embraced conventional Italian-American life: He became fluent in Italian, wore religious medals (though he rarely went to mass), and stayed close to home, never learning to drive a car nor venturing outside the United States. He was, in his own words, “the most provincial so-and-so in the world.” Yet many of Marcantonio’s deepest passions dealt with national and international issues, be it ending Jim Crow, reversing United States foreign policy during the Cold War, or winning independence for Puerto Rico.³⁴

Many working-class Italian neighborhoods had a palpably closed air, their residents traveling elsewhere only when absolutely necessary and exhibiting deep hostility to outsiders. The intense familialism that southern Italians brought with them gave their communities greater stability than other ethnic neighborhoods, and greater insularity. Literary critic Marianna De Marco Torgovnick described Bensonhurst, where she grew up during the 1950s, as “dedicated to believing that its values are the only values.” Yet she emerged from her youth thoroughly cosmopolitan, with the covert support of a father who superficially seemed utterly parochial.³⁵

World War II enlarged working-class New York’s cosmopolitan strain. The political, economic, and social demands of the war undercut ethnic and racial insularity and accelerated the fight for racial justice. Although the armed services were racially segregated, they brought soldiers into contact with a far wider range of men than most had dealt with before. Men who had rarely if ever left New York found themselves sharing the most intimate experiences with men from profoundly different backgrounds, opening their eyes to the particularity of their own ideas and way of life. One Brooklyn infantryman wrote from Luxembourg to his wife that “more than half of my platoon is

from the South. Almost all of them are farmers—many of them are genuine hillbillies, with all that implies. One thing I know is that we don't know the U.S. New York . . . [is] out of this world.”³⁶

Total war broadened the vistas of even workers who did not serve in the armed services. War industries tended to have heterogenous work forces since they needed to rapidly recruit workers in a tight labor market. At the Brewster Aeronautical factory in Long Island City, which built fighter planes, the ten thousand workers—Italians and Irish with a sprinkling of Jews, African-Americans, and German-Americans—formed friendships along ethnic lines but overcame interethnic tensions to build a powerful union, crossing ethnic boundaries when voting for leaders.³⁷

The democratic ideology used to build support for the war amplified its structural impact. The pluralist redefinition of national identity and greatness, promoted by the Popular Front and elements of the New Deal during the 1930s, reached fruition during 1940s. Nothing better symbolized its broad acceptance than the playing at the 1940 *Republican* national convention of Earl Robinson's “Ballad for Americans,” which defined America as the sum of all the races, religions, nationalities, and occupations to be found within it. A 1945 Academy Award-winning short film of Frank Sinatra singing another Popular Front pluralist paean, “The House I Live In,” carried the same message: “The people that I work with/The workers at my side . . . The right to speak my mind out/That's America to me.” The idea that the country's strength lay in its diversity and in tolerance became official ideology, saturating political rhetoric and the mass media.³⁸

Nothing better symbolized the cosmopolitan, pluralist spirit that infused New York in the wake of World War II than the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Jackie Robinson Dodgers. The roster of the 1949 team reads like a line from “Ballad for Americans,” with its three African-Americans, one Jew, one Hispanic, two Poles, a Slovak, two Italians, two Scandinavians, and an Italian Hungarian. Most white Dodger fans did not root for the team because it was the first in the major leagues to be racially integrated (though that breakthrough did reflect New York's racial liberalism). Integration brought tension to the stands at Ebbets Field, which were no longer homogeneously filled by working-class white men. Yet the Dodger faithful, perhaps begrudgingly, accepted and were even proud of the team's role in breaking down racial exclusion. When in 1957 the team threatened to move, one fan wrote to Mayor Robert Wagner: “I cannot impress upon you too much how important it is to keep the Dodgers in Brooklyn. . . . The Dodgers, being composed of

Negroes, Spanish, and Whites, are a good example of how good you can get if everyone works together regardless of race or color.”³⁹

New York provided extraordinary opportunities to escape parochial bounds. Its incomparable subway system, with its low fare—a nickel until 1948 and only fifteen cents as late as 1966—made the whole city in all its richness accessible to almost everyone: museums, libraries, jazz clubs, concert halls, street festivals, parks, demonstrations, debates, theater, and the city colleges, which until 1976 had no tuition. In Shirley Clarke’s movie *The Cool World* (1963), a subway trip to Coney Island by a Harlem teenager who has never seen the ocean is an occasion of joyous, liberating discovery (though ending in a tired, sad trip back to a life whose confinements were clearer than ever). Generations of young New Yorkers would ride the subway to arbitrarily-picked stops, just to see what was there.⁴⁰

The proximity of so many ethnic and racial groups made the city an arena for the creation of cultural hybrids whose innovations recast local, national, and even world culture. Active efforts at cultural crossbreeding—driven in part by ideological concerns—helped catalyze the process. Nowhere was the postwar explosion of cosmopolitan creativity more evident than in the world of music.

Cuban and African-American sounds, for example, were brought together in the 1940s at dance halls like the Palladium by such seminal figures as trumpeters Mario Bauza (who was classically trained in Cuba) and Dizzy Gillespie, laying the roots for what later developed into salsa and introducing new rhythmic structures to jazz, rhythm and blues, and later rock and roll. The audience for the new music was not just Hispanic. “The 1949 recordings of Machito’s ‘Asia Minor,’ ‘Noro Morales’ ‘110th Street & 5th Avenue’ and Tito Puente’s ‘Abaniquito,’” wrote Latin-music expert Max Salazar, “created a bond between . . . New York City’s ethnic groups. Jewish, Italian, Greek, Irish and Afro-Americans danced side by side with Cubans and Puerto Ricans.” One of the first Latin music radio shows in the city was broadcast over WEVD, which was owned by the Yiddish, socialist newspaper, the *Daily Forward*.⁴¹

Dion DiMucci, growing up in the working-class Italian neighborhood along Belmont Avenue in the Bronx (from which his group took its name), achieved stardom adopting a cappella and doo-wop styles from black teenagers. He wrote his hit song “The Wanderer” as an attempt to imitate the rhythm and blues songs he learned from the African-American superintendent of an apartment building near his home. Unlike some white musicians

who blandly covered black hits, Dion produced a sound with what one black disc jockey called “street attitude. . . . Dion, he had a New York^z swagger, a New York walk, a New York way of talking, that New York style.”⁴²

That New York style. For all the differences among ethnic groups, something of a transethnic working-class persona could be found in post-World War II New York. The most obvious shared cultural trait of working-class New Yorkers was that they were contentious, referential, ironic talkers. Ordinary New Yorkers had something to say about everything, whether in Spanish, Yiddish, Italian, or English, and did so at such a rapid clip that outsiders often could not understand them. Ideas, insults, and commentary spewed forth in argots that deeply enriched the national language.⁴³

New York talk had a wise-guy quality to it. Wherever you looked, there was a know-it-all, a smart aleck, somebody looking for an angle. This side of the New York persona could be rollickingly funny, for example in the hands of comedians Phil Silvers and Sid Caesar. But many outsiders found unattractive its city slickers’ presumption that everyone else was a rube.⁴⁴

In a shrewd essay published in 1961, Daniel Bell attributed this side of New York culture to the city’s economic structure. It was the world of highly competitive, small-scale manufacturing and services, “in which survival depends upon ingenuity, ‘shmearing,’ cutting a corner, trimming a margin, finding some other way to make a fast buck in the swift race,” argued Bell, that gave New York “its particular beat and distinctive character.”⁴⁵

For Bell it was the Jewish petite bourgeoisie, immersed in the garment and wholesale trades, that set the cultural tone of the city. Through their disproportionately large role as both producers and consumers of entertainment and culture, Jews had a huge influence on the texture of the city. Yet the fast-talking New Yorker with an explanation for everything was as likely to be an Italian baker or an Irish transit worker as a Jewish garment shop owner.

The very harshness of life in the city—“its hazards and its deficiencies,” as E. B. White put it—contributed to the sharp, wisecracking, improvisational culture of its working class. Nowhere was this clearer than in the play of children, who turned obstacles into opportunities and created games like stoopball, boxball, punchball, stickball, Chinese handball, skelly, and potsie that took advantage of the peculiarities of the dense, urban environment.⁴⁶

The fast-talking New Yorker was not simply a *handler*. Interwoven with the search for a deal was a democratic ethos, a willingness to listen to one and all. Some commentators and memoirists, like Irving Howe, saw this as specifically a Jewish trait as well. But a lack of deference toward elites, a willing-

ness to hear out others, and a skepticism often edging into cynicism could be found among working-class New Yorkers from other backgrounds, too.⁴⁷

While there was a certain amount of swagger in the New York working-class persona, and more than a little of what later came to be called attitude, there was a tentativeness as well, stemming from the outsider's uncertainty, the sense of marginality that many felt as a result of their status as immigrants or children of immigrants, nonwhites, nonnative English speakers, or simply workers. Brewster Aeronautical unionist Al Nash recalled "how articulate the workers were in the men's room, while it seemed so hard for so many of them to speak up and express themselves at union meetings or before a supervisor." Yet sometimes stolid workers took the lead. One former worker at a New York warehouse recalled that "the primary leader . . . was George, a huge, mean-looking but soft-spoken African-American who was painfully inarticulate. When he had to explain something from scratch, . . . he rambled all over the place telling fractured, incomprehensible stories and attempting to link them to equally incomprehensible principles." Yet George, not the official union representative, got the workers to understand the key issues in their confrontation with management.⁴⁸

The marginality that many working-class New Yorkers felt, which often manifested itself as timidity and social awkwardness, could be converted through a kind of cultural jujitsu into coolness. This was a trait often associated with African-Americans, but at least to some extent it could be found among working-class New Yorkers of all sorts. Once, Jerry Della Femina recalled, several members of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team made an appearance at Coney Island. "The whole neighborhood showed up, but even then we were *very* cool, we just watched. There wasn't any loose talk about this guy's trading card, or that one's autograph."⁴⁹

Sports were enormously popular with working-class New Yorkers, especially men, but tastes ran eclectic. In New York working- and middle-class culture of the 1940s, sports, jazz, classical music, serious literature, and modernist art inhabited the same universe, all consumed by the same individuals or at least the same communities. Even if they were sometimes intimidated by the guardians of high culture, New York workers embraced the arts with enthusiasm. Opera had a legion of followers who might not be able to afford performances at the Metropolitan Opera but who listened avidly to its weekly radio broadcasts and to the Enrico Caruso records they invariably owned. Symphonic music could be heard for fifty cents at the outdoor concerts at City College's Lewisohn Stadium, a favorite summer outing.⁵⁰

Alongside this enthusiasm for the arts lay a facet of working-class life that historians have downplayed, its brutality. New York working-class life was tough, and toughness was common and respected. Gangsters and petty criminals were a daily presence in working-class life. They could be found at work, selling jobs and protection, stealing goods, taking bets, making loans, running racketeer unions, and acting as management goons. In neighborhoods they ran numbers, made book, and dealt drugs. Most illegal activity did not require violence, but when need be, mobsters and crooks were capable of stunning brutality.

Many workers abhorred mobsters, and some fought heroically against them. But others accepted their presence and even admired them. In Brownsville, home base of “Murder Inc.”—a notorious racketeering outfit—many teenagers looked up to the gangsters, hanging around pool halls and candy stores hoping to attract their attention. The seeming ability of mobsters to command their own fates led black transit worker Robert Fulton to want to be one before he eventually settled on unionism as an alternative path to mobility and power.⁵¹

It was not just the crooks who were tough, and who admired toughness. Consider the following obituary of one Barney Brostoff that appeared in *The Hawsepip*e, the newsletter of the Marine Workers Historical Association, a group of retired maritime workers, largely left-wingers:

Our dear Brother Barney died April 11, 1984. Barney fought in the ring as a flyweight and was a contender. He fought the shopowners’ goons as a rank and filer of the N.M.U. [National Maritime Union] and he fought the fascists in Spain as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Barney was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal during WWII. He leaves his wife of 34 years, Marilyn and his daughter, Ivy. He was a loving Husband, devoted Father and a loyal Union Man. We will miss him.⁵²

Notable are both how tough Brostoff must have been and how it was his penchant for and prowess in combat that his colleagues chose to emphasize in memorializing him. In a world where raw power was repeatedly experienced from the receiving end, those who could dish it out, who could play hard ball, held an allure. Both gangsters and working-class leftists reveled in watching boxing, with its ritualized reproduction of the brutality that was so often the stuff of their daily lives.⁵³

Both *A View from the Bridge* and *On the Waterfront*, the movie by Arthur

Miller's erstwhile collaborator, Elia Kazan, captured the infiltration of the rough, corrupt ways of the waterfront into the most intimate relations of their longshoremen protagonists. Miller and Kazan had a tendency—typical of artists who came of age during the 1930s—to see heroism in physical labor. Hubert Selby Jr.'s extraordinary, sad, sprawling 1964 waterfront novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* spurned that saving grace, painting a picture of routine brutality in the lower depths of working-class New York: neglected children, alcoholism, sexual frustration and assault, prostitution, violence, drugs, and poverty.⁵⁴

High culture and rough culture, provincialism and cosmopolitanism, the smart aleck and the cool coexisted in working-class neighborhoods, families, and individuals. It was this rich, complex stew—the product of a particular history, occupational structure, population mix, and social geography—that made the New York working class so vibrant.

The sensibility of New York workers—savvy, opinionated, democratic—helped set the tone of the nation in the postwar years. It got broadcast by labor leaders like Transport Workers' Union president Michael J. Quill and ILGWU president David Dubinsky. It spread through comics and singers like Jackie Gleason and Frank Sinatra. It percolated up through intellectuals, writers, filmmakers, record producers, and academics who grew up in New York working-class homes and moved on to more exalted circles without completely leaving behind the worldview and manner that surrounded them as youths.⁵⁵

Locally, the sensibility of New York workers had more direct impact. The vast New York labor movement was shaped by the complexities and contradictions of the culture of its members. Like the men and women who built it, it was a movement that was vibrant, inventive, powerful, tough, and sometimes self-defeating. Through it New York workers played a major role in shaping the politics and future of the region.

CHAPTER 3.

Labor Days

From the era of the American Revolution through the end of the twentieth century, organizations of workers—called variously benevolent societies, trade associations, brotherhoods, trade unions, and labor unions—strived to advance the interests of working men and women in a society dominated by those with greater economic and social resources. Unions and groups closely allied with them—known collectively as “organized labor” or “the labor movement”—spearheaded efforts to improve workers’ wages and employment conditions. Unions helped democratize America by serving as the most important channel, other than the ballot box, for workers to influence society.¹

No country has a more epic labor history than the United States. Places like Lowell, Homestead, Pullman, Coeur d’Alene, Ludlow, Lawrence, Gastonia, and Flint—sites of now largely-forgotten battles—testify to the ferocity of the struggle organized labor had to wage to establish itself in the face of unremitting employer resistance and harsh legal restrictions. At incandescent moments, organized labor surged forward, in the process reinventing itself, only to be thrown back by economic downturns, harsh repression, and its own mistakes.

When World War II ended, labor’s most dramatic moments lay behind it, the violent clashes that left piles of bodies on history’s stage. The relative routinization of post-World War II labor relations reflected organized labor’s strength, not its weakness. During the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which split from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935, finally cracked such corporate bastions of antiunionism as General Motors and U. S. Steel, helping to spark a general expansion and invigoration of labor. By the time World War II ended, the labor movement had achieved a size, robustness, legal standing, and degree of influence previously outside its grasp. Nowhere was that more true than in New York.

To fight their postwar battles, New York workers mobilized a sprawling set of institutions that had been erected over the course of nearly a century. In 1947, New York City’s labor movement, vast and complex even compared to that in union strongholds like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit, included an extraordinary 1,107 private-sector union locals, ranging from obscure groups

like the Russian Bath Rubbers and the Wholesale Paint Salesmen to the 35,000-member Transport Workers Union Local 100, notorious for repeatedly threatening to shut down the city's mass transit system, and Musicians Local 802, whose 25,000 members included the New York Philharmonic Symphony and top solo artists. New York housed the national headquarters of three dozen unions, including all the major apparel unions, the United Electrical Workers (UE), the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), several transportation and maritime unions, and organizations of entertainment, newspaper, and communications workers.²

Although no accurate union membership figures exist for individual American cities, in the early 1950s at least one million New York City workers paid union dues, and quite possibly more, constituting over 6 percent of all the nation's unionists and between a quarter and a third of the city workforce.³ A roster of New York unions has a Whitmanesque quality to it, evoking the extraordinary range of productive activity and human experience in the nation's greatest city: there were four locals of Airline Dispatchers; eleven of Barbers and Beauty Culturists; eleven of Boilermakers; forty-two of Carpenters; one of Commercial Artists and three of Coopers; one each of Dental Technicians, Diamond Workers, Firemen, Foremen, and Funeral Chauffeurs; thirty-eight of Hodcarriers, Building and Common Laborers (including the House Wreckers and the Curb Setters); twenty-five of Machinists; fifty-three of Railway and Steamship Clerks; one each of Screen Publicists, Seltzer Water Workers, Sightseeing Guides, and Theater Ushers; six of Upholsterers; and one of Vending Machine Service Workers.⁴

Not all types of New York workers were equally likely to belong to a union. As the postwar strike wave made clear, transportation, communications, and some types of service workers were unusually well-organized. Unionized construction workers at least matched them in number, making up a fifth to a quarter of the local labor movement. And they in turn were outnumbered by unionized manufacturing workers.⁵

The structure of the labor movement mirrored and reinforced working-class tendencies toward both cosmopolitanism and parochialism. Virtually every type of union organization that existed in the country could be found in New York, from pure industrial unions, like the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers, who built and repaired ships at yards scattered around the port, to pure craft unions, like Ironworkers Local 40, the men who assembled steel frames for New York skyscrapers. But most New York unions fell someplace in between.

Craft unions represented workers who engaged in a particular activity—for example, carpenters—no matter where employed. Generally their members had specialized skills, developed through a formal or informal apprenticeship prerequisite to full union membership. In addition to bargaining with employers, craft unions helped their members get jobs. In New York, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, union-run hiring halls were the exclusive or a main way workers found employment in the maritime, construction, building service, hotel and restaurant, commercial printing, brewery, and retail industries. While forging membership loyalty, hiring halls provided a service to employers in industries with jobs of short duration and employment needs in constant flux. To get a plumber or a welder or a typographer, all you had to do was call the union hall. By training workers, supplying them to employers, and enforcing minimum levels of competency, unions helped sustain the small-scale, flexible production so central to the New York economy.

Controlling the labor supply allowed unionists to push up wages and preserve jobs for their kin, conationalists, or political colleagues. Until the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act made them illegal, unions used closed shop contracts—which required employers to hire only their members—to exert labor market control. In New York such agreements were extremely common in the printing and construction industries and spreading elsewhere. In late 1946, for example, more than a quarter of the members of UE Local 475, a large Brooklyn-based union that represented workers in machine shops and metalworking factories, were covered by such contracts. After Taft-Hartley, unions continued to run hiring halls, though in theory nonmembers now could use them, and sign union shop agreements, which required all employees, once hired, to join a particular union. Union-run apprenticeships, such as the six-year program of Typographers Local 6, further reinforced control over the job market. At the major newspapers, senior Local 6 members—“situation holders”—in effect owned their jobs, with the right to be temporarily replaced by “substitutes” when they chose not to work.

Controlling the gates to employment reinforced the craft identification and fraternalism that kept unions of skilled workers tight-knit. Some, like the construction electricians, largely restricted membership to sons or other close relatives of members, ensuring them well-paying jobs and giving these organizations unusually strong cohesion since they were literally family affairs. But labor market control also enabled unions to engage in discriminatory practices that fragmented the working class and bred ethnic, racial, and gender resentment.⁶

Industrial unions represented all the workers in a particular industry or at a particular work site, regardless of what function they performed or how skilled they were. Generally these unions had less control over hiring than craft groups, if any at all. Confronting an employer-selected workforce pushed industrial unions toward inclusive membership policies and even social egalitarianism. Mutual dependence rather than craft identity served as their basis of solidarity. To attract members, retain their loyalty, and further bonds across employer, craft, ethnic, and racial lines, some industrial unions sponsored extensive social activities. Local 65 of the RWDSU, which represented blue- and white-collar workers in wholesale shops, had sports teams, theater parties, a photography club, educational classes, "socials," more elaborate "affairs," and a union-run nightclub that during the 1950s featured prominent blacklisted entertainers.⁷

Though labor groups sometimes presented craft and industrial unionism as opposites, most New York unions incorporated elements of both. The needle trade unions, to which about a quarter of the unionists in New York belonged, provided a model. Emerging out of much-celebrated Progressive Era struggles, these unions reached their peak membership only after World War II. Even as they grew, they remained ideologically and culturally rooted in radical immigrant subcultures. Idiosyncratic in some ways, they nonetheless exemplified much of what made New York labor distinctive.

With over half its national membership in New York, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) was by far the city's largest union. At the end of World War II it had some 150,000 New York members. By the early 1950s its area membership had grown to nearly 200,000, and it remained close to 180,000 into the early 1960s. The ILGWU's huge size gave it extraordinary financial and political power. In 1950 its assets included sixteen medical clinics, a resort in the Poconos, and four radio stations (one of which, WFDR, broadcast from New York). That year, the union put on a lavish celebration of its golden jubilee that featured Vice President Alben Barkley, congressmen, ambassadors, opera stars, and a union-produced movie.⁸

The ILGWU represented virtually everyone producing women's and children's clothing, including some ancillary workers like truckers who carried goods between jobbers and contractors. However, unlike a true industrial union, the ILGWU divided its members among over two dozen locals according to their craft (for example, cutters) or the branch of the industry in which they worked (for example, corset and brassiere workers). Further com-

plicating its structure, separate locals represented Italian-American cloak-makers and dressmakers. (Jews dominated many non-Italian locals, some of which conducted business in Yiddish.)⁹ The Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers (with 22,000 New York members), the Fur and Leather Workers (14,000 New York members), and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (75,000 New York members) had similar setups.¹⁰

To coordinate bargaining and other activities, apparel locals belonged to "joint boards." These were the centers of union power. The ILGWU Joint Board of Cloak, Suit, Skirt, and Reefer Makers' Unions, for example, bargained for 40,000 workers in eight locals, enforced contracts, organized non-union shops, administered member benefits, and supervised the work of business agents appointed by its constituent units.¹¹

Many New York unions used variants of this structure. The Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers, for instance, had locals defined variously by craft, location, type of work, and nationality, with a District Council bargaining for ten Manhattan and Bronx affiliates. The Hotel Trades Council, a permanent group with its own staff, bargained and administered a master industry contract that covered 35,000 members of seven different unions. Joint boards, district councils, and similar forms of organization suited well the many New York industries that had a large number of small employers, a great variety of skills and skill levels, enclaves of craft tradition, and ethnically diverse workers. They allowed even small groups of workers to bargain through entities that dwarfed most employers in size and which could afford large, sophisticated staffs with specialized skills in areas such as research, education, and political action.¹²

In part to counter the power unions gained through agglomeration, employers joined associations of their own. In New York, only a small minority of contract negotiations involved a single union and a single employer. One study found that at least three-quarters of New Yorkers employed under union contracts were covered by an agreement with either an employers' association or an informal employers' group. By contrast, nationally only about a quarter of unionized manufacturing workers and a third of other union members were covered by contracts negotiated with employers' associations.¹³

Joint boards and district councils, even as they promoted the professionalization of labor relations, industrial solidarity, and economies of scale, allowed the continued existence of ethnic and craft collectivities with distinctive values, traditions, internal politics, and relationships to the community.

This was not, however, a pluralist idyll. Locals based on nationality, for example, created myriad possibilities for discrimination, particularly the reservation of superior jobs for members of a particular group. The 1945 New York State Anti-Discrimination Act (the Quinn-Ives law) in theory made it illegal for unions to exclude members on the basis of race or national origin.¹⁴ Nonetheless, two years after its passage, unions reporting nationality or foreign-language locals included the Actors and Artistes of America, Meatcutters, Typographers, ILGWU, and Furriers.¹⁵

The durability of nationality locals testified to the continued salience of ethnicity in working-class New York and the reluctance of union leaders to disrupt important power bases. ILGWU Local 89, for example, the Italian Dressmakers, in the early 1950s had nearly 30,000 members, five branch offices, and a weekly radio show. Its longtime general secretary, Luigi Antonini, used it as a foundation from which to wield power in the Italian-American community, local electoral politics, and even Italy itself, organizing a series of Italian-American labor coalitions that were extremely active before World War II in the anti-fascist struggle and after the war in blocking the formation of any Italian government that included Communists.¹⁶

The problems associated with nationality locals became particularly severe when the makeup of the workforce shifted, as happened in New York during the two decades after World War II. By then, the once sharp tensions between Jews and Italians in the needle trades had become largely a thing of the past as a result of decades of shared experience, mutual acculturation, and union propaganda. But as Puerto Ricans and African-Americans began entering the industry in large numbers, interethnic tensions again became common amid charges of union discrimination against the newcomers. Similar problems developed in unions without nationality locals, but the existence of such units legitimized the primacy of ethnicity and bred resentment among incoming groups not granted their own locals.

The ILGWU was particularly egregious in its refusal to recognize the changing ethnic makeup of its membership. By 1952, 13 percent of the union's New York membership was Puerto Rican and 10 percent African-American; by 1962, 24 percent was "Spanish" and 16 percent African-American. But the leadership acted as if the union were still the Jewish-Italian organization it had been decades earlier. Jews and Italians dominated the union hierarchy and the best-paying jobs, while the union loaned or gave millions of dollars to favored Jewish and Italian causes. ILGWU officials refused

requests to set up Spanish-language locals, failed to translate membership material, and, when under pressure to add Spanish-speaking organizers, exhibited their visceral distrust of Puerto Ricans by hiring Sephardic Jews.¹⁷

Craft units within or parallel to broader union structures also bred parochialism. In many unions, one or more craft locals opted out of joint bargaining arrangements believing that they could cut better deals on their own. In the mass transit industry, a series of craft and occupational groups sprung up in the 1950s, some seeking to displace TWU Local 100 as the bargaining agent for their members. The form that dissatisfaction with the TWU took reflected the way the union's own structure—dozens of “sections” corresponding to particular crafts, job titles, and work sites—reinforced craft identities and parochial concerns.¹⁸

Joint boards and district councils provided little opportunity for workers from different crafts or ethnic groups to interact with one another. Typically these delegate bodies, with officials selected by and responsible to either a coterie of leaders of affiliated locals or the international officers above them, distanced rank-and-file workers from both members of other locals and top union leaders.¹⁹ They contributed, too, to the paucity of female leaders exercising real power.

The New York labor movement had an unusually high percentage of female members, reflecting the nature of the city's economy. Women formed a majority of the membership of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW) and the ILGWU and a substantial proportion of unionists in some other types of manufacturing (like electrical equipment production), hotels and restaurants, retail trade (more heavily-unionized in New York than elsewhere), communications, and government service. Yet in spite of this strong representation, very few women unionists achieved prominence.²⁰ The many obstacles they faced included greater domestic responsibilities than men, less confidence about taking part in public activities, and open hostility from male compatriots.²¹ Since, by rule or custom, advancement in unions was generally a gradual, step-by-step affair, the interrupted work careers that women typically had put them at a disadvantage. Nationally, for example, between 1956 and 1958 the ILGWU, with a membership the latter year of 442,000, enrolled 185,000 members while losing 187,000. This high turnover, one expert wrote, largely reflected “women, who leave the shop because of marriage or pregnancy, often to return when their children are older.” In part for this reason, the ILGWU middle and upper-level leadership was overwhelmingly male. Every added hierarchal level made it more difficult for women to

achieve policy-making positions. During the postwar years, Local 6 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees, which was one-third female, generally had only two women on its executive board of about fifteen members, while the joint board to which it was attached generally had only one woman out of thirty to fifty members.²²

By joining together diverse groups of workers, the hybrid craft-industrial structure, that played so large a role in the New York labor movement, facilitated the massive displays of worker power evident in the postwar years. However, having the prime arenas of union activity defined by craft, product, or nationality simultaneously tended to limit workers' horizons and leave the direction of the union movement in the hands of a self-perpetuating leadership. A structure that gave workers strength harbored within a potential for weakness.

New York unionists took seriously the injunction—central to the union gospel but often honored in the breach—to organize the unorganized. For some, this reflected a commitment to unionism as a social crusade, an end in itself or a step on the road toward broad societal transformation. For others, it stemmed from a desire to preserve or extend organizational and personal power.

Organizing blue-collar workers generally entailed less hardship and a greater likelihood of success during the quarter-century following World War II than later on. Many workers associated unionism with a better life, while often employers seemed resigned to its inevitability. Organizing sometimes involved little more than distributing literature and membership applications outside a work site, making a few home visits, and winning a government-run election.²³

Unions leveraged strength in one field to organize others. Starting in the mid-1920s, for instance, electricians in International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 refused to use or install electrical equipment unless it had been made by members of the local. This proved to be a highly effective means of unionizing electrical equipment shops, though it pushed up the cost of local electrical work and bred considerable resentment among IBEW locals in the rest of the country.²⁴

Some unions had to constantly organize simply to maintain their existing bargaining power, as the small scale, low capital requirements, and razor-thin margins typical of New York industry brought high business turnover. Non-union apparel shops, for example, kept popping up even in the heart of the

garment district, and unionized jobbers tried to avoid union wages by shipping goods out-of-town to non-union contractors. In May 1949, ILGWU organizer William Lurye, a forty-year old presser on leave from his shop, was killed in the lobby of a midtown building housing several struck nonunion firms. Lurye's murder was apparently the work of mobsters with ties to non-union manufacturers, garment trucking firms, and some shady AFL locals. By keeping the garment district under continual surveillance, launching periodic organizing drives, hiring strongarm men (from the Seafarer's International Union), holding mass demonstrations, and calling selective strikes, the ILGWU contained nonunion production but never eliminated it.²⁵

Organizing white-collar workers proved more difficult than signing up blue-collar workers. Many labor leaders spurned office workers, dismissing them as lacking bargaining power or as insufficiently proletarian. But they were key to labor movement growth. Postal, railway, and retail clerks—mostly men—long had been unionized, in part because they worked in proximity to blue-collar unionists. A significant number of entertainment and communications workers belonged to unions, too. But otherwise white-collar workers were almost entirely unorganized; nationally, in 1946 union contracts covered fewer than 20 percent of clerical, retail and wholesale, and professional workers, compared to over 80 percent of railroad, construction, and trucking workers, and 69 percent of manufacturing employees. This differential became critically important as rapid postwar growth of service, office, and professional activities led white-collar workers to outnumber those engaged in manual labor by 1956.²⁶

A few New York unions did make concerted efforts to organize white-collar workers. They generally had the most success at companies where unions already represented the blue-collar workforce. The ILGWU and the ACW organized garment industry office and sales employees, while UE won the right to represent a thousand Sperry Gyroscope clerical and technical employees in Brooklyn and Long Island. The American Newspaper Guild bargained for newspaper reporters, sales, and clerical employees, and the CIO's United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA) and its AFL rival, the Office Employees International Union (OEIU), represented clerical workers at a variety of manufacturers and food companies.²⁷

For white-collar unionization to become solidly established, though, labor needed to organize "paperwork 'factories,'" establishments where white-collar work was the core function, not ancillary to blue-collar activity. The most aggressive efforts to do that were launched by the left-wing UOPWA. In

New York, where it was headquartered, the UOPWA organized credit clearinghouses, direct mail firms, and book publishers. It also made strides among workers at nonprofit social service agencies. Its most important targets, however, were the insurance and finance industries.²⁸

UOPWA had surprising success among insurance firms. A wartime organizing drive resulted in contracts with a dozen regional companies and three national giants, Prudential, John Hancock, and Metropolitan Life. These agreements generally covered only insurance agents. But Prudential alone had 14,500 agents, 1,850 of whom were in New York City, while Metropolitan Life had over 2,000 in the New York area.²⁹

Finance proved to be a harder nut to crack. A pre-World War II UOPWA drive went nowhere. A second effort during the war, when inflation eroded already-low white-collar salaries, yielded modest gains at Republic National Bank, Bankers Trust Company, and New York title companies.³⁰ Soon after the war, UOPWA made inroads at several other banks. According to one historian, by early 1947 about 10 percent of the financial employees in the city belonged to the union.³¹

With a union breakthrough threatening, employers stiffened their resistance. For the UOPWA, the key test came in mid-1947. The union had been focusing on the Brooklyn Trust Company, one of the nation's largest banks. However, as soon as Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which placed new restrictions on unions, the bank fired three activists, transferred others, and threatened mass dismissals. In response, the union went on strike, apparently the first walkout ever at a major United States bank.³²

From the start, the strike was a rough affair. Perhaps because the president of Brooklyn Trust was a former Police Commissioner, the police seemed to go out of their way to aid the bank, using clubs to break up a large picket line and repeatedly arresting picketers. The union fought hard, too, picketing the homes of nonstrikers and mobilizing hundreds of demonstrators from other unions. In one incident, the police arrested two members of the National Maritime Union for assaulting a bank teller on his way to work.

The union claimed that 200 of the bank's 750 workers were on strike, but the bank said only eighty employees walked out. Able to maintain most of its operations, the bank refused to negotiate with the union and spurned State Labor Board efforts at mediation, saying that it would only deal with the union if it was a government-certified bargaining agent, knowing that the UOPWA would not seek a recognition election because, like many labor groups, it refused to comply with a Taft-Hartley provision that required

union officials to take a non-Communist oath in order to use the services of the National Labor Relations Board. As the strike dragged on, the number of picketers dwindled. Unprotected by federal labor law and unable to mobilize a majority of the bank's employees, the union could not find a way to pressure it into a settlement. Finally, after a month, the strikers voted to return to work without having even discussed their demands with the bank. UOPWA continued to represent workers at other banks and kept up its organizing efforts, but the Brooklyn Trust debacle marked the beginning of its decline.

As UOPWA's fortunes began to fade, momentum passed to the United Financial Employees (UFE). Organized in 1942 as an independent union of Wall Street workers, the UFE signed a contract with the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) a year later. In 1946 it affiliated with OEIU as Local 205, and within a year had contracts covering employees of the NYSE, the Cotton Exchange, the Curb Exchange (predecessor of the American Stock Exchange), A. M. Kidder & Co., and bond clerks at twenty brokerage firms.³³

Less than a year after the UOPWA lost its Brooklyn Trust strike, the UFE tested its strength in a dramatic Wall Street showdown. The immediate issue was its desire to add a union shop clause to its contracts with the three exchanges. Perhaps more important, it hoped that a show of force would energize its stalled organizing campaign at the brokerages.³⁴ As long as the UFE remained weak and largely restricted to the exchanges, the brokerage houses that ran the trading centers tolerated it. But when the union began trying to organize the brokerages themselves, forbearance ended. The issue was ideological as well as financial. According to sociologist Joseph Fitzpatrick, the brokers had "the tendency to picture their own advance as a result of their own initiative and ability, and they look[ed] upon . . . union activity as the refuge of the careless and lazy who try to get by pressure what they have failed to get by work or brains."³⁵

After working for nearly a month without a contract, on March 29, 1948 over a thousand employees from the Stock and Curb Exchanges—mostly men—walked off their jobs. The UFE drew support from the AFL and Catholic social activists. More importantly, the Sailor's Union of the Pacific and the Seafarer's International Union strongly backed the stock exchange workers. The Seafarer's offices, located near Wall Street, served as the strike's headquarters, a reminder of the historic links between New York's maritime trade and its financial industry.³⁶

At the strike's outset, five hundred sailors joined the financial workers on picket lines outside the struck exchanges. The second morning all hell broke

loose. In an effort to keep the NYSE from opening, pickets from the UFE and the seamen's unions blockaded its entrance by lying down on the sidewalk. The police responded by charging the pickets with, the *New York Times* reported, "a flurry of club swinging, so furious that at least one policeman broke his nightstick." Within ten minutes twelve people had been injured and forty-five arrested. It was a morning of incongruous sights: a woman in a fur coat lying on the sidewalk, daring the police to attack her; burly, white-capped sailors battling policemen before an audience of hundreds; police wagons inching their way forward through crowds of financial workers trying to get to work. The next day, newspapers at home and abroad prominently displayed photographs of the "Battle of Wall Street."³⁷

At first the UFE maintained the loyalty of the majority of workers at both exchanges, repeatedly throwing up picket lines of a thousand people or more. However the exchanges, having prepared carefully for the strike, sustained near normal business using supervisory and brokerage house personnel. After thirteen days, as strikers at the Curb Exchange drifted back to work, the union signed a contract there providing for a 10 percent pay increase but no union shop. The UFE held out for two more weeks at the NYSE, but management did not budge. Ultimately the union accepted essentially the same contract terms offered before the walkout. Hundreds of NYSE workers dropped out of the union.³⁸

Although not quite the disaster that the Brooklyn Trust strike had been, the Wall Street strike was a major setback. By taking a hard, antiunion line, using managerial personnel to maintain operations, and mobilizing police support, the financial industry effectively checked postwar unionization efforts. In the short run this had slight impact on labor's power, but in the long run it proved terribly important, stymieing expansion of the union movement's white-collar beachhead and ensuring that one of the city's most important and fastest-growing industries would remain largely nonunion.

The size of the New York labor movement, the militancy it displayed during the postwar strike wave, and its extensive political activities forced a broad range of local institutions to recognize it as a major social actor. This reinforced a local predilection for business and government to join together with labor to resolve disputes and promote social harmony. This corporatist approach prevailed both within particular industries and, to a limited degree, across them.

At the end of World War II, New York already had a long history of

labor-management cooperation, going back most famously to the Protocols of Peace proposed by Louis Brandeis to end the 1910 cloakmakers strike. The garment industry abandoned this elaborate system of industrial governance within six years, but the emphasis it placed on collaboration, order, and productivity, and its positioning of industrial relations as a public rather than private matter, helped shape the views of a generation of trade unionists, businessmen, and politicians.³⁹

After the collapse of the Protocols, the garment industry adopted a system of grievance arbitration that forbid strikes and lockouts during the life of a contract and gave ultimate power to resolve disputes to an impartial chairman. Widely copied, by the late 1940s the New York metropolitan area had more than thirty permanent industry arbitrators or impartial chairmen with jurisdiction over fifty branches of industry, 22,000 employers, and 397,000 workers.⁴⁰ Some industries had substantial labor-management structures. In the electrical contracting industry, for example, labor-management cooperation under the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act led to the formation of a Joint Conference Board to resolve disputes. Joint employment and pension bodies followed. In 1943 these were all folded into a Joint Industry Board which, financed by a 1 percent assessment on wages, ran a hiring hall, supervised apprenticeship training, and administered contracts, pensions, and vacations.⁴¹

Business-labor interaction across industry lines occurred on a more ad hoc basis. The organizational fragmentation of New York business made the construction of permanent corporatist structures difficult. Labor had effective peak organizations in the AFL Central Trades and Labor Council and CIO Central Labor Council. By contrast, the major groups joining businesses together across industrial lines, like the Commerce and Industry Association and the Chamber of Commerce, tended, as Alice Cook and Lois Gray noted, "to be dominated . . . by national corporations with New York headquarters and by the city's largest financial houses" which had "national rather than local orientation." These associations took stands on labor issues, for example supporting the Taft-Hartley Act, but given the diversity of their membership, which included union and nonunion firms, and the national orientation of their leadership, they kept aloof from local industrial relations.⁴²

It usually took the initiative of the city government to bring labor and business leaders together to resolve conflicts outside of their own industries.

New York mayors had a history of injecting themselves into labor-management contests to maintain order, end economic disruption, and curry favor with various constituencies. As soon as he took office in January 1946, William O'Dwyer found himself swamped by the strike wave, then at its height. In October, recognizing that "stop-gap emergency measures . . . would not suffice," he established a Division of Labor Relations. It intervened in disputes by first pressuring the parties to negotiate, coordinating its efforts with state and federal agencies. If that failed, O'Dwyer typically appointed a tripartite committee, consisting of a "public" member (often a judge or retired judge) and labor and business representatives to attempt to settle the dispute.

In its first three years, the Division of Labor Relations intervened in over 150 disputes.⁴³ Perhaps its most impressive achievement was brokering a "stabilization agreement" between nearly three dozen unions and the Building Trades Employers' Association in response to a slump in construction growing out of a fear of inflation and unpredictable labor costs. The pact they adopted after months of negotiations keyed wages to the cost of living, pre-dating by several months the better known adoption of a cost-of-living-adjustment by General Motors and the United Automobile Workers (UAW).⁴⁴

The city brought labor and capital together for other purposes as well. In 1947, for example, in reestablishing a Department of Commerce to encourage local economic development, O'Dwyer included in its structure both "Business Executive" and "Labor" advisory committees. When three years later the mayor appointed a committee to study "the cause of decline in waterborne commerce," he chose a tripartite group consisting of government officials, labor officials, and representatives of affected businesses.⁴⁵

Some advisory groups merely served as window dressing. Nelson Rockefeller resigned as provisional chairman of one business advisory group (that also had labor members) because O'Dwyer proved so lax in following up on its recommendations.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, at least on the level of symbol and etiquette, by the late 1940s New York political leaders accepted labor as a leading institutional force, deserving consultation on a broad range of matters, and useful in maintaining social harmony.

Not only government recognized labor. By giving nearly six million dollars to various charities and social service agencies between 1943 and 1946, "CIO stature in New York and the relationship between labor and the community was immeasurably enhanced," as one unionist put it. NYC CIO

Council secretary Saul Mills noted in late 1945 that “No major community health or welfare agency serving our city is without CIO representation.”⁴⁷

By the late 1940s, organized labor had solidly established its presence in the City of New York. Though not always welcomed into the inner circles of power, it generally had at least a seat at the table when its interests were at stake. What labor would do with the impressive measure of power, or at least potential power, it had achieved was not at all clear. That was a question of politics and ideology, matters about which New York workers were by no means in complete accord.