
Failed Neighbourhood Legitimacy: Alternative Transportation and Sanitation Services in North Brooklyn

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Legitimacy refers to authority that is invested in individuals and institutions through societal consensus. It is legitimate power. 'To have authority, power needs legitimacy. Authority in turn needs trust' (Pardo and Prato 2019: 6). Pardo and Prato's *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* is a collection of research studies about legitimacy and the worldwide erosion of leadership and government, written by international social scientists. The discussion is quite timely. Everyday around the world there are reports of increasing discontent among ordinary people with those in power. This dissatisfaction is igniting grassroots protests and various forms of activism which highlight the conflict between élites and masses.

Increasingly, there is failed legitimacy through broken democracies that lack effective leadership and governance. In New York City, ethnographic research on gentrification and large-scale development indicates that neighbourhoods have been reconfigured and refashioned with new residences. This has led to a crisis of adequate services greatly affecting the quality of life. This essay will focus on neighbourhoods in North Brooklyn.

The North Brooklyn waterfront overlooking Manhattan's east side was dormant for years, because of deindustrialization. Former factory buildings, and a number of piers were left to deteriorate, but served as reminders of a vibrant past. It was not until a sustained real estate boom in New York City continued into the new millennium, and Michael Bloomberg became Mayor, that the waterfront became a desirable prospect to City Planning and private developers. It was to become a lucrative market.

The Bloomberg administration has been accused of running government like a corporation, which is executed through private development and revenue production. Luxury development, through rezoning, redevelopment, and tax abatements was believed by this administration to generate all kinds of economic activity for New York City. This approach assisted in realizing Bloomberg's vision of New York as a 'Luxury City' (Greenberg 2010: 31). Under Bloomberg, Sanitation workers would search through people's trash seeking violations of trash collection ordinances (such as mixing recyclable and ordinary trash and/or putting receptacles curbside too early). One observed that a homeowner was issued a Sanitation violation after his family cleared out an apartment of furniture after their elderly father had passed away. They received this fine for putting the furniture curbside prior to 4PM the day before their scheduled collection. In the meantime, the homeowner was trying to prepare the apartment for the arrival of new tenants, revenue that his family needed.

At the same time that revenue production is done by 'taxing' ordinary New Yorkers, the activities of more affluent groups are supported. The use of bicycles as a mode of transportation

is encouraged. As noted by Krase and Krase (2019), it is part of the conceptualization of a luxury city. These researchers indicate that biking is promoted in gentrifying neighbourhoods and constructed bike lanes connect these areas. Evidence for this claim is that in some Queens' communities serviced only by buses and cars, they have not witnessed the same expanse of biking, bike lanes or biking programs like Citi Bike as the levels in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Yet, some Queens' communities are in need of additional modes of transportation. Legitimacy fails in this regard to provide for those in need. Moreover, there is also failure to enforce the safety of all stakeholders; namely, pedestrians, drivers and private property, with the addition of bicyclists. According to the NYC Department of Transportation, 'Bicyclists have all the rights and are subject to all the duties applicable to drivers of motor vehicles' (2018). Moreover, they are not to ride on sidewalks. Car drivers and pedestrians need to exercise more caution since bicyclists ride both ways on one-way streets and ride through red lights. Negotiation is required for all moving, transport vehicles and pedestrians. One life-long resident said as she crossed the street and was almost hit by a moving bicycle, 'These bicycles, they're so arrogant!'

The parking and storing of bicycles ignite a clash of social norms. Bicycles are often locked to poles which state street cleaning rules. In some cases, they are left for months. This causes a liability for the homeowner since the bicycle creates an obstruction on the sidewalk. Homeowners are responsible for the condition of the sidewalks in front of their homes, which should be free of impediments that could cause harm to those passing by (which includes snow and trash). In some cases, the police have been called; the response was, 'Someone in City Hall likes bikes'. The volume has gotten beyond an amount that the police can effectively manage. There is little to no enforcement on matters related to bicycling.

The Bloomberg administration has also made a reputation on housing development. In 2002, it proposed a housing program for New York City to include 'roughly 60,000 housing units throughout the five boroughs over the next four years' (Steinhauer 2002: B1). The plan for these units was to incorporate subsidized apartments for special needs populations, residents with a middle-income and luxury market rate housing for the affluent. About 40,000 units would come from rehabilitation under the control of the City's agency for Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). The remaining housing units would be created through private development with much of it located along the available parcels of waterfront throughout the City. North Brooklyn's large waterfront was already a development priority of the Bloomberg administration, since the waterfront consists of huge parcels of land. Previous mayoral administrations were able to transform cheap, abandoned property with little value, using public funds, and develop housing. Now, with land and housing prices in New York City spiralling upward, unwanted buildings for rehabilitation are relatively unavailable. These are gut renovated by owners or small developers.

Rezoning land use in New York City is a legal process referred to as ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Process) that goes through a number of levels of governmental votes before it becomes law. Bloomberg's final plan for the waterfront 'rezone[s] a 175-block area of

Greenpoint and Williamsburg’ (Cardwell 2005: 1). It contains 54 acres of parks including a publicly run esplanade that spans the entire waterfront.

The residential population has dramatically increased, along with pedestrian visitors and cars with out of state license plates. There has been a 17 percent increase in the population since 1980. By 2010 13,413 housing units were added to the built environment (Krase and DeSena 2016: 20-21). That number is expected to increase as is the population.

The failure of governance lies with the lack of planning around other essential services. One such service is sanitation. For residential buildings, it is provided by the City of New York. All of the additional residents, visitors and tourists bring more trash. Public receptacles overflow with trash by the end of the weekend. The containers of private homes are the repository of trash belonging to those passing-by. The Department of Sanitation has acknowledged the trash problem. In 2017, it was announced that in parts of North Brooklyn, there would be a reduction of days requiring street cleaning. In other words, parked cars would need to be moved less days of the week. It was stated that the streets had become cleaner (The Greenline 2017). Thus, street cleaning four days a week was no longer warranted. A few months later, ‘The Department of Sanitation put the plan to reduce the number of alternate side parking days on hold after the neighborhoods’ cleanliness rating dipped below the city’s threshold for six months in a row’ (Rizzi and Staff 2018).

On residential streets the combination of new construction, gut renovations and overflowing trash has contributed to a major problem with rodents. Rats are displaced by development. Residents question if the developers properly bait for rodents at their construction sites. And also, are construction workers on site properly disposing of their trash? Only an investigation by the appropriate government agency could address these queries. At present, rats are spotted running on residential streets, under parked cars, around trash cans and in trash bags. This problem is exacerbated by excess trash. The trash feeds the rodents. Numerous rat sightings are a new experience for long-term residents. In fact, some homeowners are investing in private extermination services surrounding their homes and in their backyards. Some engage in activism regularly reporting to NYC government and also to local politicians requesting a follow-up.

With a plan for large scale development and attendant growth, why have services not been increased? Where is public health to address the rodent problem? Where is the enforcement side of both public health and sanitation? Sanitation publishes ‘A Summary of Sanitation Rules and Regulations’ (Department of Sanitation of New York 2015) which states that buildings must have enough receptacles to collect trash for 72 hours and should include tight lids (p.10). There is a fine schedule for each violation. While walking around, it is not uncommon to see violations. Many containers are without lids. One homeowner commented, ‘They [Sanitation] lost my lid’. While pacing up and down his street, another remarked, ‘I can’t find my lids. Therefore, some homeowners remove them so they do not get lost. There are other violations as well. Trash is often disposed in retail plastic bags and placed curbside without a container.

There are no warnings or enforcement of rules and regulations on the part of Sanitation services. Moreover, co-ordination between the Departments of Sanitation and Public Health is unclear.

In their chapter in Pardo and Prato's edited collection (2019), Krase and Krase discuss the breakdown of legitimacy in another part of Brooklyn. They make the point, '...when authorities claiming traditional legitimacy based on accountability to the community fail in that regard they are seen as illegitimate' (p. 188). In other words, they have failed in their responsibility to the community.

Why do citizens in North Brooklyn experience this lack of accountability? This essay offers two explanations. One is a disconnection between the bureaucracy of New York City government, including Police, Sanitation and Public Health bureaucrats, and the local workers. The published transportation rules around bicycling are not enforced. Nor are expectations around sanitation. For example, after a holiday, residents will inquire about trash collection through nyc.gov or by calling 311. Typically, what these centralized sources of information convey is not what locally happens. In other words, if trash collection is missed because of a holiday, the central systems say that it will be collected the next day. Yet, it is ignored by the local Sanitation garage. With few exceptions, the local structure simply continues its usual practices.

The other explanation for a lack of accountability is failed leadership by the present Mayor. Following Michael Bloomberg into office, who was referred to as the billionaire Mayor, Bill de Blasio ran on a platform of 'the tale of two cities'. He contrasted wealthy New York and impoverished New York. Even the song selected for his first campaign was 'Royals', by Lorde. After years of fatigue from Bloomberg's rezoning and development plans, revenue collection by raising taxes and issuing fines and siding with the Transportation Alternatives lobby, de Blasio was a refreshing choice for many New Yorkers. At this point and into his second term, many have come to see him as an ineffective disappointment. Recently in *The New York Times*, there was an article with the title, 'Why de Blasio Has Few Bad Days at the Office: He's Seldom There' (Neuman 2018). It goes on to explain that he prefers to work from the Mayor's residence. Perhaps the workforce takes a cue from his work habits.

One purpose of legitimacy is to act 'for the people'. Using Pardo and Prato,

'A key task of governance is to establish and nurture the connection with citizens' values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the exercise of power' (2011: 1).

And those connections are missing. As of this writing, the problems remain. Bicyclists continue to violate traffic laws, and sanitation services are negligent. On one trash collection day, some residents remarked that their trash was not collected. The Sanitation truck passed them by attending to some, but not all. Anarchy has become rule in North Brooklyn.

This essay offers a final note regarding the failure of governance to work on behalf of the people. In an adjacent neighbourhood to North Brooklyn in Long Island City, Queens, it was

announced that Amazon would locate its New York City headquarters there. Political and corporate élites were the dealmakers. They and others celebrated the increased economic development for the City. Other groups were critical and opposed the plan, concerned about the subsidies Amazon would obtain, and also quality of life issues, such as increased housing costs, more overcrowding of public transportation and vehicular traffic and lack of an adequate infrastructure. The ‘masses’ were left out of the process. Their voices were not considered. The entire process was poorly planned and executed. At the end, the corporate giant, unaccustomed to opposition, reneged on the deal. Thus, the activism of citizens continues.

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