

A Tale Of Many Cities: Potholes in the Road To Municipal Reform



Juan Gonzalez. *Reclaiming Gotham: Bill de Blasio and The Movement to End America's Tale of Two Cities*. New York: New Press, 2017.

There is no better role model for aspiring radical scribes than Juan Gonzalez. The country's leading Latino journalist is cohost of *Democracy Now!*, a former columnist for the *New York Daily News*, and twice winner of the Polk Award for his investigative reporting. Not many veterans of campus and community struggles in the Sixties and workplace organizing in the 1970s later moved into mainstream journalism with such distinction, Gonzalez has managed to combine daily newspapering with continued dedication to the cause of labor and minority communities.

As a *New York Daily News* staffer for two decades, Gonzalez broke major stories on city hall corruption, police brutality, and the toxic exposure of cops, firefighters, and construction workers involved in 9/11 attack rescue or cleanup work. When he wasn't cranking out twice-a-week columns, he helped lead a big Newspaper Guild strike and wrote four books including *Harvest of Empire*, a history of Latinos in America.

Gonzalez's movement background and intimate knowledge of New

York City politics makes him an ideal chronicler of the unexpected rise (and near fall) of Bill de Blasio as a city hall reformer. In *Reclaiming Gotham: Bill de Blasio and The Movement to End America's Tale of Two Cities* the author situates New York City's current mayor within a "new generation of municipal leaders" whose election reflects a broader "grassroots urban political revolt" throughout the United States. In that political cohort, however, de Blasio's personal history as a Central America solidarity activist and, in the 1980s, "an often disheveled admirer of socialist ideas" makes him fairly unique.

Gonzalez reports that, under de Blasio, poor and working class New Yorkers have received a \$21 billion "infusion of income and economic benefits" in the form of "universal free pre-kindergarten and after school programs, long overdue wage increases for municipal workers, paid sick leave for all, and a virtual freezing of tenant rents." He believes the mayor's sweeping pre-K initiative – deemed impossible by Governor Andrew Cuomo and other critics—"should be judged one of the truly extraordinary educational accomplishments of any municipal government in modern US history."

Although critics of the mayor, on the left, may disagree, Gonzalez argues that de Blasio has presided over the "most left-leaning government in the history of America's greatest city." Yet, New York remains in thrall to private real estate capital to such a degree that affordable housing for the non-wealthy is still shrinking, rent stabilization offers insufficient protection against displacement, and the mayor's "build-or-preserve" housing plan, incited by tax breaks for developers and neighborhood rezoning, won't provide enough below market rate units to meet future need. (For details on this on-going housing crisis, see this.)

Two decades of mayoral rule by Rudy Giuliani and then Michael Bloomberg certainly lowered the bar for judging their unexpected successor. *Reclaiming Gotham* draws on Gonzalez's

own past Daily News exposes of, their shady insider deals, costly privatization schemes, and condoning of police misconduct. Between 1993 to 2013, conservative, business-friendly policies made it much harder for “the vast majority of longtime city residents in the outer-boroughs” to find “living wage jobs, affordable dwellings, decent public schools, or even city parks they can use.”

Nevertheless, when de Blasio, a former school board member and city councilor from Brooklyn, announced his candidacy for mayor, “few political experts gave him any chance of victory.” Much union money flowed to two leading rivals: City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, a Bloomberg enabler who watered down paid sick leave legislation, and former city comptroller Bill Thompson. Both stumbled on the campaign trail while de Blasio, then serving as NYC Public Advocate, tapped into anti-corporate sentiment magnified by Occupy Wall Street, plus mounting concern about “stop and frisk” and other forms of police abuse.

At the polls in November 2013, a long-overdue backlash against the Bloomberg-Giuliani era had broader impact. As Gonzalez reports: “Voters chose an even more radical African-American woman, Letitia James to replace de Blasio as public advocate...and they propelled nearly twenty candidates into the city council who had been backed by a small yet influential left-oriented third party, the Working Families Party.”

After this sweeping collective victory, de Blasio told a British Labour Party audience that he “became mayor because everyday New Yorkers were hungry for a clean break from the status quo.” He declared himself uninterested in “policies of timid maintenance” and announced his intention “to take dead aim at the crisis of our time, economic inequality.

There were many obstacles in his path. Among them was a nervous Wall Street; its always reliable corporate tool in Albany, Governor Andrew Cuomo (also backed by the WFP); the

charter school and landlord lobby; state legislators united in their bi-partisan disdain for any reform emanating from downstate; and the rabid hostility of local media outlets and NYC police union leaders.

One New York?

To make local progress, de Blasio relied heavily on a post-campaign “brain trust” of mixed provenance, including “skilled technocrats with decades of experience managing major public agencies” and “a slew of progressive labor and community activists.” Among the latter were close associates of Jonathan Rosen, de Blasio’s friend and campaign policy advisor, whose consulting firm, BerlinRosen, represents “some of the city’s biggest real estate companies, all of which have major business interactions with city government.” (The firm’s co-founder, Valerie Berlin, is a former staffer for ACORN, a past de Blasio ally that became BerlinRosen’s first client.) By styling himself as public relations man, Rosen skirted legal requirements that lobbyists register with the city and file annual reports on their clients and contacts with city agencies.

De Blasio’s “core group,” as Gonzalez calls it, decided to fight fire with fire. They created “an outside lobbying force to push through and publicize the mayor’s major reforms.” The Campaign for One New York and United for Affordable NYC both took advantage of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision permitting the solicitation of “unlimited donations to indirectly support a candidate’s policies and thus avoid individual restrictions on campaign contributions.” Before Campaign for One New York was shuttered in March 2016, it “raised more than \$4 million, much of it from wealthy donors and unions doing business with the city.”

According to Gonzalez, de Blasio was seriously mistaken in his belief that “he could fight the system while also depending on key figures within the system; that he could seamlessly

combine grassroots neighborhood activists and labor leaders of all stripes with a major wing of the Democratic Party's neoliberal "growth" machine of consultants, lobbyists, and wealthy donors, many of whom typically regard proximity to political power as a way to make money, not matter who is in charge."

Blinded by Hack Behavior?

Reclaiming Gotham, explores whether the mayor, in light of this problematic coalition, should be deemed a "radical outsider, a "political insider," or some combination of both? De Blasio's backing of Hillary Clinton's presidential primary campaign didn't strengthen his "radical" credentials. In 2016, "the crisis of our time" produced an insurgent candidate who is still a socialist (although less disheveled than he used to be). Bernie Sanders was mayor of his state's largest city, defended the Sandinistas like de Blasio once did, and, today, is "far closer in viewpoint to the mayor than Hillary."

Nevertheless, de Blasio displayed little personal hunger for "a clean break with the status quo." He briefly delayed endorsing Clinton, and according to the author, that "put unexpected pressure on her to align more with Sanders program"—a feint to the left more likely motivated by her mounting primary losses. The Working Families Party, which helped elect de Blasio, polled its own rank-and-file supporters and, based on those multi-state results, endorsed Sanders. Few WFP-backed city councilors or allied unions followed its lead. Only three Democrats out of forty-eight on the council supported Bernie. Even seventeen out of nineteen Progressive Caucus members on the council backed Clinton, calling their own anti-establishment credentials, on national issues, into question.

Of greater concern, from a local public policy standpoint, is de Blasio's complicity with consultant-driven schemes that triggered "massive year long investigations into pay-to-play

corruption in New York's city hall and allegations of campaign finance law violations." As one friend of Bill told Gonzalez, "he is blinded about hack behavior and the influence of people who get paid a lot of money to influence him."

Although the mayor claimed vindication when state and federal prosecutors decided not to seek indictments, a published summary of the evidence uncovered by Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance reveals "startling details of how de Blasio and those around him had resorted to the same kind of dark money fundraising and skirting of campaign spending limits that Democrats often accuse Republicans of employing."

The mayor's A-team, inside and outside of city hall, undermined his own putative reform agenda by soliciting donations from wealthy favor seekers, then intervening with public agencies on their behalf, and trying to evade campaign fundraising limits in a failed bid to regain Democratic Party control over the New York state senate (via spending on consultants like BerlinRosen). As a result, Gonzalez reports:

"The mayor was hounded for more than a year by press accounts that depicted him as corrupt, and during that time he was unable to enact the kind of bold reforms that marked his first two years in office. The damage to his reputation among some voters was likely to endure."

Gonzalez himself no doubt breathed his own sigh of relief when Vance concluded that de Blasio did not personally profit from any city action on behalf of privileged contributors. The uplifting narrative of Reclaiming Gotham would have become far muddier amid indictments, pending trials, and a 2017 mayoral race full of Democratic primary challengers and general election foes seeking to oust a scandal-scarred incumbent.

The Consultant Class Survives

The author expresses some sympathy for mayoral associates who incurred "tens of millions of dollars in legal fees responding

to subpoenas” and “sitting through lengthy interviews with investigators form two separate probes.” Yet somehow, amid all this travail, BerlinRosen’s young co-founder Jonathan Rosen and his wife, Debbie, chief of staff to de Blasio’s budget director, plunked down \$2.5 million for a summer home in Montauk last June. BerlinRosen now profitably serves corporate clients, labor unions, non-profits, and politicians not just in New York City, but Washington, DC and Los Angeles as well. According to Crain’s New York Business, the firm’s “team of strategists is in the middle of campaigns shaping public policy in the city, the state, and increasingly the country.”

I expect that other *Reclaiming Gotham* readers will similarly conclude that real Bernie Sanders-style progressives (or those trying to run even further to the left?) should not employ people with such divided loyalties. If your campaign helpers (and later city hall staff) include members of a “new class” of political consultants as dollar-driven and ethically-challenged as their old-school predecessors, you and they will not be creating a “radical experiment” in “people’s government.” In fact, any policy advice, dispensed by such strategists—particularly on housing and development issues—will reflect the interests of their current business clients far more than any past personal ties to labor or community organizing.

Under de Blasio, nimble practitioners of “pay to play” were quick to monetize their city hall access and influence – all to advance the “progressive agenda,” of course. Gonzalez’s account of this activity brings to mind the Teamster election scandal twenty years ago that did bring down the most left-leaning administration in that union’s history. Teamster President Ron Carey, a reformer backed by Teamsters for a Democratic Union, made the mistake of employing headquarters staffers and political consultants who decided that illegal campaign fundraising and money-laundering “donor swaps” were necessary for Carey to beat an election opponent named James

Hoffa.

The results for Teamster reform were disastrous. They included Carey's removal from office, Hoffa's eventual election (and continuing presidency), guilty pleas by the consultants responsible, the conviction and jailing of the union's political director, and Carey's own indictment on charges that federal prosecutors failed to prove at trial. Citizen Action, an ACORN-style group implicated in the scandal, collapsed soon afterwards, with its own previously admirable reputation ruined.

The role of big money in electoral politics—whether it comes from entrenched foes of union reform or corporate interests long dominant in a major city—cannot be overcome by cutting corners. Corporate influence in government (and related “hack behavior”) will not be reduced anywhere if other progressive candidates are unwilling to follow Bernie Sanders's example of running “corporate-free” (and groups like the Working Families Party fail to make candidate rejection of business donations a pre-condition for their endorsement).

In New York City, left-leaning candidates, who can develop a Sanders-style base of small donors, actually have a fighting chance to win. The city's Campaign Finance Act rewards candidates, who accept spending limits and enhanced disclosure, with public funds, based on a 6 to 1 match, the most generous local formula in the nation and a model for cities or counties, in Oregon and Maryland, now trying to implement something similar. (For more on its salutary effect, see this.)

Of course, New York remains a place where it's hard to level the electoral playing field entirely when a billionaire media mogul like Michael Bloomberg can, as Gonzalez reminds us, spend \$250 million of his own money to prevail in three straight mayoral elections, over-turning a previous two term-limit in the process. But, as demonstrated over the last

decade, on a much smaller scale, in Richmond, California, local campaign finance reform, grassroots organization building, and real people power can still be a winning combination against foes as wealthy and powerful as Big Oil.

Draining our many local swamps, of corporate influence or outright political corruption, is no easy task in municipalities of any size. *Reclaiming Gotham* includes thumbnail sketches of urban reformers in Richmond, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Newark, Philadelphia, Austin, Texas and Jackson, Mississippi that illustrate the range of possibilities for bottom-up change in many different settings. The author's deep understanding of how city hall works and for whom – under proprietors new and old – could not have been put to better and more timely use.

The strength of *Reclaiming Gotham* lies in its granular detail about local politics and public policy-making, plus its nuanced assessment of progressive gains and setbacks. In the Trump era, we certainly need more “pockets of urban resistance,” developed, in part, through city hall take-overs. Yet, as the author concludes, “those who attain positions in government will inevitably disappoint a portion of their supporters, will inevitably exhibit human weakness and flaws, and some are bound to betray their followers all together.”

When rank-and-file “supporters” and “followers” have organizational mechanisms to hold leaders accountable, either in unions or labor-backed political formations, the risk of such outcomes are somewhat reduced. But, when a big city mayoral candidate who progressives have championed gets elected, does much good, but less than expected on some fronts, what exactly is the grassroots mechanism for securing course correction during his second term? Perhaps we'll find out, after Bill de Blasio, as expected, is re-elected in November and sworn in again next January. Let's just hope that Bill Clinton won't be doing the honors again, with Hillary at his side. These friends of the mayor symbolize, better than

any other corporate Democrats, the “policies of timid maintenance” which de Blasio so disdained, in 2013, when speaking to a British Labour Party since rallied by a real agent of change (albeit one without a big city to run).

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