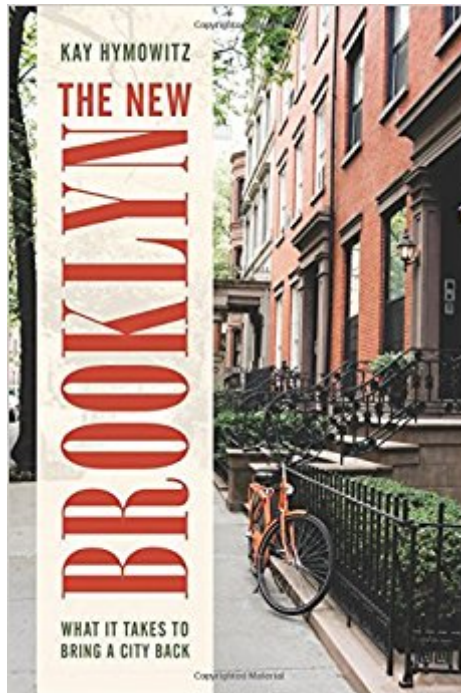


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# The New Brooklyn: What It Takes To Bring A City Back



## Synopsis

Only a few decades ago, the Brooklyn stereotype well known to Americans was typified by television programs such as “The Honeymooners” and “Welcome Back, Kotter” comedies about working-class sensibilities, deprivation, and struggles. Today, the borough across the East River from Manhattan is home to trendsetters, celebrities, and enough “1 percenters” to draw the Occupy Wall Street protests across the Brooklyn Bridge. “Tres Brooklyn,” has become a compliment among gourmands in Parisian restaurants. In *The New Brooklyn*, Kay Hymowitz chronicles the dramatic transformation of the once crumbling borough. Devoting separate chapters to Park Slope, Williamsburg, Bed Stuy and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Hymowitz identifies the government policies and young, educated white and black middle class enclaves responsible for creating thousands of new businesses, safe and lively streets, and one of the most desirable urban environments in the world. Exploring Brownsville, the growing Chinatown of Sunset Park, and Caribbean Canarsie, Hymowitz also wrestles with the question of whether the borough’s new wealth can lift up long disadvantaged minorities, and the current generation of immigrants, many of whom will need more skills than their predecessors to thrive in a postindustrial economy. *The New Brooklyn*’s portraits of dramatic urban transformation, and its sometimes controversial effects, offers prescriptions relevant to “phoenix” cities coming back to life across the United States and beyond its borders.

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## Customer Reviews

The New Brooklyn deftly narrates these familiar developments through personal history, on-the-ground reporting and a close reading of the scholarly literature. (The Wall Street Journal)[H]er descriptive prose disproves the thesis that a picture is worth a thousand words.... Two chapters cover 19th-century Brooklyn industry's rise and fall, necessary to establishing land-use patterns and the inventory of local architecture. Six case studies argue for the diversity and interdependence of gentrification; Park Slope's urban homesteaders find recreation and artistic objects among creative people in Williamsburg, who grow their businesses in the revived industrial space of the Navy Yard. Three chapters argue for the importance of class over race and of value systems over all: Sunset Park's education-minded Chinese and Bedford-Stuyvesant's black professionals belong among the gentrifying forces, but black Brownsville remains "the eternal ghetto." Hymowitz argues that gentrification displaces fewer people than is generally thought and improves life for the poor who are able to remain.... Summing Up: Recommended. All levels/libraries. (CHOICE)[T]his story of What It Takes To Bring a City Back, to quote the book's subtitle, is a good and true account for Park Slope.... [The] chapters about Sunset Park and Bedford-Stuyvesant are informative. (Reason)"Brooklyn was long a magnet for immigrants and migrants wanting to pursue the American dream. Now, after harsh decades, Brooklyn is back. In her new book, Kay Hymowitz shows how the old Brooklyn bloomed and wilted and now how the New Brooklyn - both its gentrified, poor, and immigrant neighborhoods - is thriving and struggling in its place." (Michael Barone, American Enterprise Institute, author of Shaping our Nation: How Surges of Migration Transformed America and Its Politics, and co-author of The Almanac of American Politics)"Kay Hymowitz knows Brooklyn: what it was, what it is and what's been sustained, added and lost in its remarkable transformation." "The New Brooklyn" goes past nostalgia and branding to deliver closely observed insights into what the actual place has become, how it got there and why it matters." (Harry Siegel, New York Daily News columnist, Daily Beast senior editor and lifelong Brooklynite)

Kay S. Hymowitz is the William E. Simon Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor of City Journal. She is the author of 4 books including Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age, Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age, and Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men Into Boys. She has

resided in Brooklyn, New York since 1982.

I was born and raised in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in the 1960s and 70s, before it gentrified, and still live here. My parents were lower-middle-class immigrants. I have a college degree and a middle-class job, though my income is far below Park Slope's current median. From things that Kay Hymowitz says in her book, I know that she lives two blocks from me, although I'd never heard of her. I bought *The New Brooklyn* after reading a positive review in the New York Times and expected a thoughtful, well-researched examination of gentrification. I was quickly disappointed. Statements put forth as facts are based on the flimsiest of evidence. Sweeping generalizations about entire ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes are based on one or two anecdotes, or often on nothing at all. And that's just for starters. To fully enumerate all my criticisms of this book would require far more space than an review allows. So I'll focus on what troubles me most: Kay's obvious disdain for anyone who isn't an upper-middle-class resident of a gentrified neighborhood and her seeming inability to view people as anything more than caricatures of their ethnicity or social class. I'll focus primarily on her discussion of Park Slope because that's the neighborhood I know best, but there's plenty of fodder in the other chapters as well. Kay's stereotyped views and disdain for those less affluent than her are already palpable in the opening chapters, where she attempts to give a brief history of immigration in New York City. Discussing Italians, she says that, *"Lucky for them, there was plenty of work in the trades at which they excelled: ditchdigging, bricklaying, and stonecutting."* This is nonsense. No serious historian would claim that Italians *"excelled at ditchdigging and so were lucky to find work in a field for which they had such aptitude."* In his meticulously researched history of immigration in New York, *"City of Dreams,"* Tyler Anbinder discusses the factors that drove, and still drive, the poorest immigrants to menial labor: lack of a trade, lack of English skills, discrimination, desperation. To say that Italians were great at digging ditches, and were lucky to be doing it, is callous and ignorant. The first neighborhood that Kay discusses is Park Slope, where she moved in 1982, when gentrification had already begun. She lives in what real estate agents consider to be the most desirable part of the neighborhood, the section bounded by Union and Third streets, above Seventh Avenue. (I use Union Street rather than Flatbush Avenue because Union is the boundary of a highly coveted school zone.) The housing stock is Victorian-era brownstone, much prized by today's urban upper middle class. I've lived in that area of Park Slope all my life and know it well. One of the many things

that struck me as I read Kay's account of what it supposedly was like when she moved there is that she apparently assumes that all Irish- and Italian-Americans are working class. Some were, but you'd never guess from her account that people like my brother's college-educated godparents even existed. For her, they were all "white working class." And as the book progresses, it's clear that she has an extremely crude stereotype of what she imagines the "white working class" to be. "The locals," she informs us, in a later discussion explaining the difference between "the locals" and "the newcomers" in Park Slope, "wanted to shop at big supermarkets like Pathmark and later at Costco; the newcomers preferred smaller, more personalized shops." This statement baffled me — one of the biggest complaints that locals had about gentrification was that it drove out the small neighborhood shops where they had been going for years. And I have plenty of upscale neighbors who love Costco, not to mention Starbucks. She continues, "The middle-class people — not locals, of course — who were lovingly stripping the mahogany trim in their Victorian homes were put off by the aluminum siding... that the working class used," though I don't think it's even possible to put aluminum siding on a brownstone, and she doesn't cite any examples of anyone actually trying. A peculiar couple who created a neighborhood spectacle in the 1960s when they decided, in the days before the Landmarks Preservation Commission, to paint their brownstone pink, are held up as an example of the locals' "working-class" tastes, even though in reality, locals thought the couple were completely crazy and no one ever followed their example, or even wanted to. She adds that the locals "stowed junk" in their backyards — just so you know, everyone I grew up with had teeth and wore shoes — "and maybe grew some grapevines and fig trees, still on view in many Park Slope gardens today." Her airy dismissal of "grapevines and fig trees" is difficult to understand. I still have fond memories of the grapevines and fruit trees that my neighbors lovingly tended in their backyards. On summer afternoons we'd play in a neighbor's grape arbor, its roof of thick green leaves providing a perfect shelter for our kids' clubhouse. We ate grapes right off the vine. If it were today's upper-middle-class residents who'd had the idea to cultivate grapes and figs in their backyards, Kay would laud them as the ultimate locavores. In her chapter on Chinese immigrants in Sunset Park, Kay informs us that the Chinese work really, really, really hard, don't speak English, and "don't have a family life, or at least not one that middle-class Americans would

recognize as such. Right. Oh, and they all want their kids to go to Stuyvesant, of course. (By the way, Kay, I went to Stuyvesant myself, as did a number of other lower-middle-class and working-class kids from Park Slope. Did you assume we'd become ditchdiggers? And yes, I attended public school. Loved PS 321. My teachers were terrific. Incidentally, I remember them leading class discussions on topics like stereotypes.) I could go on and on, but I'm running out of space, and I only have three more days to return my Kindle copy for a refund. You get the idea, though. It's not surprising that Kay seems to be living in a bubble. In one telling passage, she says that, rather than socializing indiscriminately on their stoops with their neighbors as "the old-timers" used to do, "gentrifiers" prefer to socialize with those who share their "chosen cultural identity." She defines this identity, proudly if a bit incoherently, as "a very specific form of quasi-bohemian, educated, progressive middle-classness." If the "working class" liked to sit on their stoops chatting with the neighbors, she says, it was only because they lived in "small apartments." I disagree. The reason that my neighbors and I socialized on our stoops, regardless of social class, was simply that, like humans everywhere, we valued community. We sought relationships with the people around us. Living among people from all kinds of backgrounds, being part of their lives simply because we were neighbors, opened my eyes to worlds I might never have known existed. I still consider that one of the best aspects of growing up in Park Slope in the 1960s and 70s. And it's still what I miss most. Kay ought to try getting to know people outside her bubble — it might widen her breathtakingly narrow view of anyone who doesn't share her "chosen cultural identity." Kay tells us, not surprisingly, that gentrification is "the best thing that could ever happen" to a neighborhood. Indeed, "The New Brooklyn" reads like one long rationalization by someone who wants to reassure herself that gentrifiers are saviors. Readers who seek the same reassurance will love this book. But anyone looking for a sober, well-researched book on gentrification should look elsewhere.

The "history" left out two World Wars, a Depression and even Prohibition -- all of which left a mark on New York and Park Slope. The author should have just simply about the history of Park Slope. Then I realized, reading the text that it was written as a PhD thesis and was not really written as a book at all. It omits so much that is relevant, and describes only what the author has collected in the way of information. Observations and insights are "shallow." Still it does have interest for

someone as deeply connected as I have been. I worked from January 2, 1968 until the end of 1975 as the Vice President of the Downtown Brooklyn Development Association, bringing the work of disconnected people initiating change together with each other and with the various agencies of the government that were nominally responsible. From the Mayor on down to the fire, police and sanitation departments, nothing good was being done for Brooklyn. I knew almost every one of the individuals mentioned in the text as far as I've read it.

Kay Hymowitz has written an important book that captures effectively the larger forces that are reshaping urban areas: the creative destruction brought about by the displacement of urban mass manufacturing by newer enterprises that rely more on professional and entrepreneurial talents. Not only have these new enterprises shifted the pool of labor employed, there has also been a transformation in living arrangements. A generation earlier, suburbanization of the professional class opened up much of Brooklyn brownstone housing for working-class families. By contrast, professionals today seek urban living close to employment and social activities so they now are bidding back Brooklyn brownstone housing. Hymowitz makes clear in her introductory chapter how this reconfiguration of employment and housing has had a harmful effect on those groups left behind. How poverty has been moved east in the borough and increasingly the borough's income distribution has taken on an "hour-glass" configuration. Elsewhere Hymowitz has written about the plight of the poor. However, in *The New Brooklyn*, she is focused on looking at the building blocks of these transformations and how they have revitalized Brooklyn. I applaud her decision just as the *NYTimes* reviewer has done. It gives us important insights into how cities can rebound and suggests the kind of support policies that can further the city's vitality. This is not to say that we should be unconcerned about the losers in the creative destruction process. However, policies to alleviate the problems faced by the dislocated must be as compatible as possible with the policies that have enabled these cities to regain their vitality. And Hymowitz has done a yeoman job in helping us understand the necessary balance.

A very interesting and thorough book for those of us who live or have lived in Brooklyn. Good details and observations. Highly recommend!

In the process of reading *New Brooklyn*. It very much recounts the changes that occurred in my own neighborhood here in Boston.

Deeply researched read, a real gem. I am curious about the absence of any mention of the amazing impact of Brooklyn Tabernacle, perhaps other faith community impacts.

Particularly interesting for those who Brooklyn the way it was

Worth the purchase price: a good job writing.

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