

**Upscaling Downtown: From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City.** Richard

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In *Upscaling Downtown: From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City*, sociologist Richard E. Ocejo examines gentrification in three New York City neighborhoods (the Lower East Side, East Village, and Bowery) from the vantage point of bars. Both a participant in and observer of the NYC nightlife scene in these neighborhoods, Ocejo explores the many tensions and conflicts stemming from the influx of bars that contribute to the reshaping of the city. As these neighborhoods become increasingly “upscale,” tensions arise between residents, entrepreneurs, politicians, and revilers. With careful ethnographic eyes and ears, he takes the reader into several NYC bars, their surrounding neighborhoods, and community meetings to uncover the fragile coexistence and frequent political contests that characterize contemporary gentrifying urban neighborhoods.

Since the 1970s, each of these neighborhoods transformed from deteriorating and disinvested slums to hotspots for urban nightlife. While bars may have served as sites of sociability and relaxation for the working class and down-trodden of the past, they become destinations shaping growth and development in postindustrial cities. As concentrations of bars swells and begins to attract wealthier visitors and neighborhood residents, the increased traffic, noise, and other disruptions reduces the quality of life of residents who have long made the once deteriorating neighborhoods their homes. Additionally, increased attention to once humble urban communities brings with it the threat of gentrification-induced displacement. In each chapter, Ocejo explores the impact of upscaling nightlife on a variety of aspects of neighborhood life. He concludes with a discussion of gentrification in general and a methodological appendix.

In the first chapter, Ocejo introduces his field sites and provides a brief history of the area. From the 1800s to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, these NYC neighborhoods transitioned from cultural centers to working class immigrant slums. As neighborhood conditions deteriorated, bars served a variety of functions for the local poor; providing both cheap drinks and social services. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, and disinvestment in the 1970s worsened conditions further. Nightlife remained vibrant as the neighborhoods declined, largely due to the influx of artists and musicians who took over lofts and tenements, initiating the first wave of gentrification in the 1960s. Many new bars, including the infamous CBGB (which itself was driven out by rising rents in 2006), opened to serve these early gentrifiers. By 2004, when Ocejo began his research, the area had many designer clothing shops, luxury hotels and condos, and fine dining establishments, attracting the young and upwardly mobile, including finance workers, the creative class, and NYU students. After sketching this history, Ocejo introduces the reader to Milano's, a "dive bar" that once largely sustained itself serving homeless alcoholics and now serves imported beers to longtime residents and authenticity-seeking hipsters.

Tensions between local and state governments over the impact of the growing nightlife scene on residents' quality of life is the subject of the second chapter. Meetings of neighborhood community boards allow residents to air grievances and evaluate applications for liquor licenses submitted by business owners. Conflicts over the definitions of "community" and "public interest" are frequent though usually resolved by the New York State Liquor Authority (SLA), whose interest in tax revenues trumps local concerns about noise, crime, safety, and the sheer volume of bars already present. Though business owners are required to receive the approval of community boards prior to applying for the state license, Ocejo reports that the SLA is not required to follow the recommendations of the community. Additionally, bar owners often deceptively pose as restaurateurs (using "bait and switch" tactics) or may bypass community boards altogether and apply to the SLA directly. Debates over the increasing concentration of

bars and the associated quality of life issues thus pits early gentrifiers against new bars and nightclubs, community groups against city and state governments, and entrepreneurs and the SLA against residents.

In the third chapter, Ocejo introduces the notion of a “nostalgia narrative,” a means by which early gentrifiers, who are now longtime residents, reaffirm their status and identity as the neighborhood’s “symbolic owners” (p. 93). Many of these urban pioneers did the work of rehabbing buildings and forming a community in the rubble of disinvestment and abandonment between the 1970s and 1990s, but now face the risk of displacement and loss of community as subsequent waves of gentrification occur. Ocejo acknowledges that this perspective ignores larger structural forces that impacted the neighborhood (such as suburbanization and the city’s financial crisis in the 1970s), the residents’ own contributions to gentrification as early urban pioneers, as well as the presence and experiences of the residents that preceded them.

Ocejo turns his attention to the bar owners themselves in chapter four. In contrast to the criticisms of early gentrifiers and community boards, bar owners position themselves as pillars of the community; restoring vacant storefronts and encouraging further investment. Many such entrepreneurs live outside of the neighborhoods of their businesses, or moved into the neighborhood attracted to the then burgeoning nightlife scene. New bars in downtown intentionally attract an extralocal clientele as a means of maintaining competitiveness. These bars become destinations for commuters and the tourists who stay in luxury hotels during visits to New York City and serve a community shaped more by shared tastes and class than space.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, Ocejo examines issues surrounding policing and regulation, and the nature of participatory democracy, respectively. The strained New York Police Department passes some of the obligation of nightlife regulation onto bar owners who feel they are unfairly scrutinized by the government and residents’ quality of life complaints. Though community

board meetings grant residents the opportunity to participate in the approval of new liquor licenses, deceptive bar owners, dismissive state agencies, and ideological conceptions of community ultimately limit the potential of participatory democracy. Community board meetings become sites of conflict rather than resolution. Ocejo concludes that gentrification in these neighborhoods makes them more exclusive and less diverse, highlighting the intersections of culture and political economy in postindustrial urban development. The exclusivity of gentrified Manhattan neighborhoods poses threats to lower income residents and those seeking affordable urban culture and entertainment, a point that speaks to the effects of unrestrained growth policies pursued at the expense of residents in need of social services rather than craft beverages. This serves to further undermine the participatory potential of residents whose livelihood is tied to the communities in which they reside.

An area worthy of further investigation is the perspectives and experiences of pre-gentrification bars and residents. While a sizable Latino population remains in the area and reports feeling both supportive of neighborhood improvements and excluded from new bars due to racial, ethnic, and class differences (p. 112-5), little attention is paid to these residents. Although it is beyond the focus of this study, further research into other types of businesses may be valuable as well. Regardless, Ocejo presents a fine example of contemporary urban ethnography and this volume fits nicely into the longstanding debate over the relative importance of cultural and political economic forces in the shaping of the postindustrial city.

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