

TAKING THE TRAIN

POPULAR CULTURES, EVERYDAY LIVES

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY & JANICE RADWAY, EDITORS



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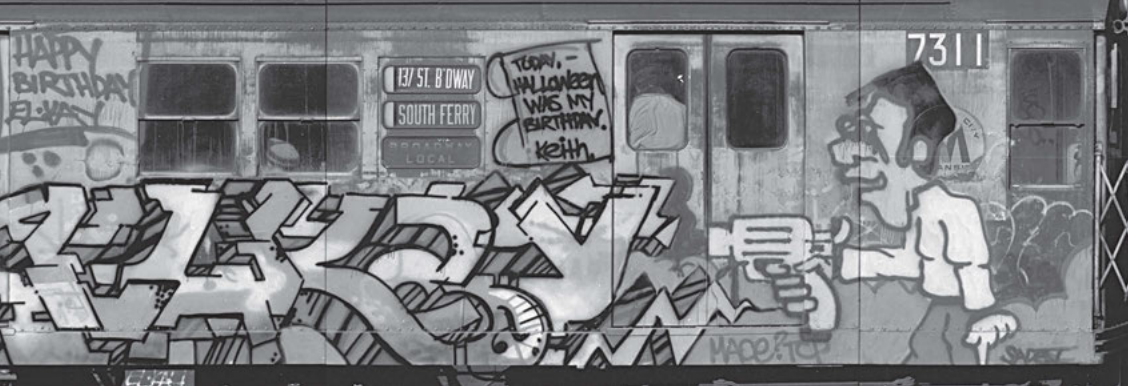
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TAKING THE TRAIN

HOW GRAFFITI ART BECAME AN URBAN CRISIS
IN NEW YORK CITY

JOE AUSTIN



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To Chris Powell, Rhonda E. Carter, and Bruce Palmer



CONTENTS

Prologue
1

1
A Tale of Two Cities
9

2
Taking the Trains: The Formation and Structure
of “Writing Culture” in the Early 1970s
38

3
Writing “Graffiti” in the Public Sphere:
The Construction of Writing as an Urban Problem
75

4

Repainting the Trains:
The New York School of the 1970s
107

5

The State of the Subways: The Transit Crisis,
the Aesthetics of Fear, and the Second “War on Graffiti”
134

6

Writing Histories
167

7

Retaking the Trains
207

8

The Walls and the World: Writing Culture, 1982–1990
227

Conclusion: A Spot on the Wall
267

Appendix: Sources from Writers
273

Notes
275

Selected Bibliography
341

Acknowledgments
345

Index
349

TAKING THE TRAIN



PROLOGUE

■ begin with two very brief stories.

On the evening of July 3, 1976, three *writers*,² CAINE, MAD 103, and FLAME ONE, entered the No. 7 Flushing to Manhattan subway line storage yard in Queens. Climbing through a hole in the fence, they brought along a huge quantity of (stolen) spray paint in precisely selected colors, as well as sketches for the “Freedom Train” that they intended to paint. They decided on a train and, during the next several hours, worked in the dark to paint all eleven cars, top to bottom, in a coordinated bicentennial theme, anticipating the city’s elaborate Fourth of July cele-

The ultimate point seems to be[:]
What kind of city do people want to
live in? The stone gray and earth
colors that we’ve erected around us,
the vast labyrinths of monolithic
structures that dwarf the scale of
man set the tone for the daily lives
of city dwellers. It’s the natural
impulse of people who are very
alive to decorate their environment,
make it beautiful. The ultimate ques-
tion raised by graffiti is[:]
What would a wildly decorated
city look like?
—Jamie Bryan,
High Times (August 1996)¹

bration. The final multicar work was approximately ten feet high and longer than two football fields. CAINE, MAD 103, and FLAME ONE's Bicentennial Train was to fly through the shared public spaces of New York City on the morning of the nation's 200th birthday like a patriotic streamer.

By all available accounts, the Freedom Train was magnificent, consisting of several whole-car paintings of the earliest designs for the U.S. flag, symbols that usually decorate the covers of high school history textbooks. Elsewhere in the city, New Yorkers prepared to celebrate the Bicentennial with a harbor parade of sailing vessels ("Operation Sail '76") and a citywide party that would be broadcast around the nation. Tourists were told to leave their cars at home and take public transportation; the Bicentennial Train seemed right in step.

But despite its expansive, patriotic appeal on this most patriotic of national holidays, the Freedom Train never traveled through the subway system. Aside from the writers who painted it, no one but a few New York City Transit Authority (TA) workers and the Transit Police saw it. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) steadfastly refused to be upstaged by what they felt was vandalism—no matter the work's patriotic appeal—and they would not risk the public's mistaking the Freedom Train as part of the officially sanctioned celebration. Rather than allow the work to become a legitimate part of the national celebration (thus legitimizing the writers as participants in the civic community), New York City's transit authorities pulled the train out of service, uncoupled the individual cars in the yard, and destroyed all of the paintings. The three writers were arrested at their homes the next day.

There are no known photographs of the Bicentennial Train among writers, although it has been reported that the Transit Police photographed it before it was destroyed. Those photographs, if they exist, have never been made available to the public.⁴

A second story:

In February 1984, after a year in which the number of U.S. citizens traveling abroad had reached a new record high, a London-based tour agency and a major airline arranged a free weekend's stay in New York City for four hundred European and Middle Eastern hotel managers as a token of appreciation for their hard

work. The visitors stayed at the famous Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, visited several of the major tourist attractions, and experienced the city's expected charms. On the Saturday evening of their stay, the visitors were to be carried by subway train to the World Trade Center, where they were to dine at the Windows on the World restaurant. To deflect the "dirty and dangerous" image of New York City thought to exist foremost in the European mind, a special renovated and repainted "graffiti-free" subway train had been arranged and paid for by the tour agency, at a cost of \$4,000.

The oddity of this particular train's refurbished appearance did not go unnoticed by the visitors, who were well-informed about the city's cultural pleasures. While a few seemed pleased, several others were genuinely disappointed that the writing had been removed from the train and wanted to know what had happened to the "real" New York City they had come to see. This led some of the visitors to question the authenticity of their guided experience of the city overall. "It's very disappointing not to have something that's part of the local color," remarked a German. An Italian agreed: "We have graffiti on our monuments in Rome and we don't whitewash them when Americans come over. . . . The subway should be like it is, not like it should be." A *Times* reporter was there to record their reactions, which were duly noted in a news article for the paper's Metro section.⁵

By the time of this visit, New York City was widely understood to have fully recovered from its financial crisis. The real estate market had enjoyed several boom years in succession, the city government had regained its ability to borrow money on the bond market, and herds of yuppies could be sighted everywhere on downtown streets. These were very real differences from the New York City of 1976, when predictable moneymaking seemed more doubtful. Tourism is the city's second largest industry, and the European and Middle Eastern guests' approval for the "clean" subway was important as a marker of the city's renewed status—or at least it was important to the editors of the city's most famous newspaper. The *New York Times*' editors replied to the "Dear Deprived Hoteliers" the next day: "Let us fill you in. . . . You didn't miss a thing. The trains are an unsightly mess and imply that no one's in charge and no one cares enough except to shield distinguished visitors. Serves 'em right, in a way, that you feel deprived."⁶

These two anecdotes hint at this book's major themes. The first story highlights the sophisticated and illegal art practiced on the public subway

trains for two decades in New York City. Through their painting, writers “made a place” for themselves in the city’s public network, claiming a “right to the city” as a valuable and necessary part of its social and cultural life.⁷ While most writers were preoccupied with the everyday task of establishing and maintaining their reputation among other writers, the Freedom Train and innumerable other works indicate an equally powerful desire to speak to the entire city in new terms, and from a different perspective. Writers saw themselves as embodying an (illegal) urban beautification and education program for a fading city bent on denying its own magnificent cultural dynamics and destroying its own “local color,” both figuratively and literally. In taking the trains, writers created a new mass media, and in that media they “wrote back” to the city.

Writing was inspired by the political mass movements of the 1960s, by the utopian strains swirling within the contradictory mixture of counter-culture and commercial popular culture, by urban youths’ own sense of the narrowing possibilities for social acceptance and economic mobility in a postindustrial city, and by the traditions created within earlier youth formations, which they inherited. Part of the larger, dispersed, and ongoing struggle for public space among marginalized groups in the United States, writing quickly became a public forum for social criticism. It also served as a public arena for ritualized rebellion and rage for both youths and the adults who challenged them, particularly those adults who fostered an alliance in the “war on graffiti.”

The work of these writers did not speak out from some isolated or specially confined elite space such as an art gallery or museum. Their work circulated (often literally) through the most commonly traveled shared public spaces—the public square—of the city. Nor did writing evolve from an obscure cultural form; the everyday handwritten signature was its starting point. But these artistic choices were not freely made from some bountiful list of expressive options; instead, they reflect the limited circumstances of the writers’ own lives. In making these restricted choices, writers invited the urban community at large into a public conversation about their work, and as such, the practice of writing took on important social meanings that extended well beyond those intended or anticipated by the writers themselves.

The MTA (the “super authority” that oversees the New York City Transit Authority), in conjunction with the editors of the *New York Times* and several other powerful institutional forces within New York City, saw the paintings on the public subways in a very different light: as a dangerous and

even subversive threat to local authority. And so, in all the reporting of the Bicentennial celebrations, the Freedom Train was never mentioned; CAINE, MAD 103, and FLAME ONE's gift was refused. In that refusal, their "place" in the city was made clear.

This turn of events points to a lost possibility, a history that was not allowed to happen, or at least, not yet. For decades, New York City's image as the center of the world was tarnished by the (sometimes unintended) consequences of policies and practices at the highest levels of government, finance, and law enforcement, culminating in the city's near-bankruptcy in the mid-1970s. In a hierarchical society, centralized authority stands as the yardstick for measuring overall social stability as well as for predictable moneymaking. The difficult questions raised in the aftermath of elite decision-making proved to be too politically dangerous to articulate clearly in the public sphere. Rather than struggle with these hard issues directly, authorities shifted the focus for these fractures in the social order toward easier targets, one of which was the "graffiti" on the subways. "Graffiti" became one of several symbols promoted as a stand-in for the sense that something fundamental had gone wrong, and its removal from the subways in the 1980s presented a visible task that could measure the tangible progress of elite efforts to right the wrongs that elites themselves had created.

In the local news media, the eyes of the public were continually confronted with intentional representations of writing as vandalism. These repeated (mis)representations narrowed and then closed off the possibility for understanding writing on the trains as an important grassroots urban mural movement, a movement that could have complemented the already-significant cultural tourism that supports the city's economy. Writing opened the possibility of once again demonstrating the amazing creativity that has continually reemerged from the city's mixture of nationalities, generations, and histories.

Recognized for what it was, writing could have been promoted as a homegrown public art movement and its energies directed to the drab concrete and brick walls that are everywhere, to the filthy and faded shells of the subway trains, and to the empty and burned-out buildings that signify the city's deep social inequalities. Clearly, the hoteliers' visit suggests that there was real interest in this art even from world-hopping sophisticates, an interest that could have been used to produce badly needed revenue for city coffers and useful work for its youth. Perhaps this sort of public recogni-

tion and appreciation would have been welcomed as a sign of social inclusion to the large numbers of young people in the city who wrote on the trains and walls without authorization. Instead, the public was encouraged to see writing as a sign that “no one cares” and to see writers as vandals who terrorized the city’s “decent” citizens.

Yet writing could have served a more progressive function, and there is a further irony in this missed opportunity. At the same time that writing was being cast as dangerous and demoralizing vandalism in local papers, the federal government was dispensing millions of dollars through the National Endowment for the Humanities for community murals in the same neighborhoods from which writing sprang.⁸ While taxpayers laid out funds for young people to paint the walls in their communities under “expert” adult supervision, they paid further millions for another group of expert adults to remove the murals that the writers had created. But the final irony may be that writing is alive and well today, while the “authorized” mural movement has long since faded in all but a few cities as federal monies supporting it have progressively been cut off (the program having served its function to “cool out” central-city youth of color).

At the foundation of this book’s argument is the assertion that the cultural forms that writers developed in New York City constitute what is perhaps the most important art movement of the late twentieth century. I am well aware that this is a controversial statement, open to debate on all sides. But it is a debate worth having. The history of writing intertwines with the “war on graffiti” and encourages us to ask difficult questions about art, about the democratic aesthetics of shared public space, about centralized governmental authority, about the place of youth in the urban landscape, and about the social obligations that bind urban residents together into a shared human city. These questions could be put to any city in the world, but they are most appropriately addressed to New York City—because of writing’s unrecognized significance in the history of contemporary art; because New York City claims to be the art capital of the world and, indeed, “the Capital of the Twentieth Century”; and because New Yorkers are not known for holding their tongues.

Of course, no written history can ever be complete, even those histories written by the folks who were really there.⁹ The history of writing is not the same thing as the history of “the graffiti problem,” although the two are obviously interconnected. I built the history that I have written here around a few neglected but fundamental questions about the coevolution of writing

and the “graffiti wars” in New York City between the time of writing’s first appearance in the late 1960s and up through the early 1990s, a few years after the MTA declared the subway system to be “graffiti-free.”¹⁰ Writing is, at most, a minor violation of the already-restricted right to control the appearance of individual and public property amidst the uncontrolled clutter of New York City. Why, then, should this misdemeanor warrant a \$500+ million “war,” a war that is still raging after more than thirty years? How has “graffiti” sustained its status as a so-called urban problem during this extended period of neglect toward the nation’s cities, when issues of poverty, public schooling, health care, and meaningful employment—the material structures that support everyday lives—have been passed over? Why did writing achieve such an extraordinarily rapid and sophisticated aesthetic development in New York City long before it had even appeared in most other cities? What has sustained that development across time, and why has it appealed to so many of the city’s youth?

Taking the Train will not answer all these questions, but it can at least start the conversation. I caution the reader not to mistake *Taking the Train* for an adequate history of writing itself, a history that is best left to the writers themselves to debate and record. Rather, this book sketches out what I understand to be the general contours of the subject and some of the most significant trends and events in writing during its first two decades of development.¹¹ For a detailed history of writing as art, I refer readers to the writers’ own publications (see chapter 8 and the appendix).



1

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

At no time in the last century have resident New Yorkers or outside observers been unanimous in their opinion about the present state or the future of New York City. Predictions of impending civic collapse have a long history in this metropolis, fueled by scare stories with an ever-changing cast of urban villains—the “dangerous classes,” “the immigrant threat,” “welfare queens,” “wilding youths.” In the shared public drama of urban life, New York City is sometimes portrayed on the newspapers’ front pages and in editorials as a chaotic human hive, an unstable structure whose frantic inhabitants are at risk of fracturing the moral and legal pillars that have held it upright in the past. At the same time, we may hear and read proud and fervent assertions that New Yorkers are living in the Rome of our time, the contemporary center of human civilization. Cast in these equally familiar terms, New York City is the Big Apple, “the City That Never Sleeps,” and the Capital of the Twentieth Century—the global ground zero for fame, fortune, culture, and the cosmopolitan good life. Somewhere between these

opposites is an undetermined, heterogeneous human collective of seven million people with coexisting presents and fluctuating futures, held together within the shared public imagination by the single name “New York City.” These seven million live within thousands of differing cultural, social, and economic networks, networks that overlap in one location, intertwine and integrate in another, or remain rigidly segregated in others.

The city, as a whole, is inaccessible to the imagination unless it can be reduced and simplified.¹

While [the city] may be stable in general outlines for some time, it is ever-changing in detail. . . . There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases. . . . The image of the Manhattan skyline may stand for vitality, power, decadence, mystery, congestion, greatness, or what you will, but *in each case that sharp picture crystallizes and reinforces the meaning.*²

We seem unable to envision the whole of New York City without significantly reducing its all-too-human complexities. Within the commercial marketplace, the communications and entertainment industries filter these complexities of urban social life through familiar *framing stories* about the city’s present and future. Mass-mediated public framing stories do the cultural work of simplifying the complex city by selectively guiding our attention to particular individuals, groups, events, or trends via representations of their most easily recognized and distinguishing qualities. In commercial broadcasts, framing stories sort things out on a citywide scale, and thereby reinforce and subtly revise the mental maps that coordinate and focus our shared public expectations. Framing stories transform the complex whole of New York City into a place that is transparent, legible, and relatively predictable for the newspaper reader and television viewer, as well as the commuter, the taxi driver, and the neighborhood stroller. Framing stories encompass and orient the myriad local stories—from a horrific murder on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to a new shopping area in Flatbush—by placing them into an understandable relationship to common visions of the city’s present and future. They allow us to confront a constantly changing social environment with an always undetermined future, and yet still “put things in order” for ourselves: set daily expectations and make plans, initiate and adapt to change, interpret the past, and maintain the stability of everyday life. A framing story is a more or less unconscious and unex-

amined but nonetheless socially produced public narrative of “how things are” and “how things are likely to be” in the city. Powerful framing stories easily become “common sense.”

As might be expected among seven million people, there are always several conflicting framing stories in widespread circulation at any given time. But these competing stories tend not to be equally influential. It is by way of the commercial public sphere—the mass media business—that most New Yorkers grasp the city as a whole place. It is by way of commercially produced stories that most New Yorkers know what their governments have done and are doing, which individuals or groups are in the public spotlight, what important events are taking place, what trends to expect, what the stakes are in interpreting “the way things are” in this way or that, and so forth. In a competitive information marketplace, the “important” events and “real” meanings of our shared public lives are sold as commodities to consumers, even if payment for this commodity is only an endless barrage of advertising. As a result, some of the most important documents of public life are contained within the dominant commercial framing stories: news reports, editorials, headlines and photos, radio talk shows, and so on. The commercial public sphere signals to its audiences their respective places in the several ongoing dramas of New York City. It informs them which of the several framing stories they were, are, should be, or will soon be living. Since New York City is a national center for the commercial media, these stories are not just local; they are frequently broadcast to the entire nation and to the world.³

Even though we usually think of stories as fictional and immaterial, the mass-mediated framing stories I have in mind here both alter and reflect concrete reality in important ways. The assertion that we are guided by stories that narrate our collective lives does not deny that there are more or fewer crimes committed in some areas, more or less economic prosperity now, more or less desirable housing in this neighborhood or that. Any observant New Yorker can easily produce a substantial body of undeniable material evidence in support of any one or several of the prevailing framing stories of the moment. Framing stories are intangible, difficult to recognize, and often unconscious—they are, after all, “common sense”—but they are nonetheless created and sustained through concrete human history, through real life. But a framing story, like all other stories, selects a certain limited number of recognizable aspects of human experience for interpretation, and discards or diminishes the others. (Distortion

and intentional fabrication are obviously a part of many framing stories as well.)

On the basis of this selection and interpretation process, policies are created, public issues and problems are presented to voters, and solutions are formulated and justified. At the same time, the stories we tell ourselves are open to reflection and change. In collectively creating our present situation, we make our own story, and in interpreting our story, we create the possibility of new futures.

Take, for example, the common and recurring framing story of New York City as the Big Apple, the New Rome, the Capital of the Twentieth Century.⁴ These fantasies are not without some basis in material reality. New York has long been the largest city in the United States and is among the five largest in the world. It overtook Paris at mid-century as the art capital of the Western world. It is a city of the world spectacle, an important center of global tourism and entertainment. New York City's place near the top of the global capitalist economy is also long-standing and unquestioned. The physical structures of the city—its streets, parks, bridges, and skyline—are among the prime examples of twentieth-century modernism's monumental urban vision.⁵

In this very real but stagelike setting, the story of the New Rome presents the social reality of the city according to a progressive vision that values economic growth, cultural prestige, social stability, and opportunity for individual advancement, emphasizing "the good life" and the city's exalted place in the global hierarchy. This is the joyous, utopian New York City of Broadway musicals, reflected everywhere in clear-sky picture postcards and tourist photographs of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the World Trade Center, skaters in Central Park, and the crowds on Wall Street. This vision of New York is alive in every issue of the *New Yorker*, in the *Times*'s real estate and arts sections, in any brochure from the New York City Tourist Bureau, in Woody Allen's movies, in popular television programs like *The Odd Couple* and *Friends*, and in hundreds of other mass-media texts. Even Disney's attempt to make its mark on Manhattan has an understandable, if cruel and calculating, logic since the city has long been a national and global site for some of our most cherished myths and fantasies of life in the United States. Indeed, for an overrepresented few, New York City has been a real-life Disneyland.

But this mythic New York City is always stalked by its Other, the Naked City, the Asphalt Jungle, the Rotten Apple, where the story is one of living

in the shadowy crevices of the modern metropolis. Poverty, crime, moral decay in infinite variety, claustrophobic surroundings, alienation, uncaring bureaucracies, inequality, struggle, restricted life chances, loneliness, ruin, and loss have equally long histories in New York City, but these stories are less frequently recited. The story of the Naked City is one of a fearful and inhumane present and a lack of hope for the future. It is recognizable in the small details of a century's worth of charity agency case files, in public health campaigns against illnesses ranging from tuberculosis to AIDS, in reformers' documentary photos, and in the background or foreground of thousands of popular movies, from the film noir classic *Naked City* (1948) to *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Superfly* (1972), *Death Wish* (1974), *Escape from New York* (1981), *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), and *Godzilla* (1998). The Naked City marks the city limits of the New Rome. The Naked City makes the New Rome possible. The New Rome is built across the Naked City's back.

Conflicts and contradictions between widely circulating commercial framing stories, like the conflict I have just described between the New Rome and the Naked City, often underlie our everyday conversations as well as public debates about the city and the meanings of the events and lives shared there. At certain historical moments it seems that most New Yorkers live in the New Rome; at another time, the shadows of the Naked City seem to cover the entire metropolis.

For almost two decades after 1965, the conflicting narrative frames that sorted out the city's events and "made sense" of the trends in the metropolis progressively narrowed and then became fixed into a single, repeating, formulaic storyline: New York City is falling apart, the New Rome is moving elsewhere, the Naked City is upon us. Heated local discussions in newspapers, in congressional meeting rooms, and on park benches often dealt with whatever *particular* aspect of the city that seemed to be falling apart *at that moment*: its moral order, its streets, its status in the national and global hierarchy of cities, its government, its commitment to its children, the safety of residents, its economy, the crime rate. And there were sometimes furious debates about assigning responsibility for these failures, and about the proper public actions to be taken in response. But the narrative framework of "urban decline" predominated and encompassed almost all these localized stories and debates. Understanding the fluctuating connections between the various framing stories of New York City in the past and the dominance of the Naked City framework after the mid-

1960s is fundamental, I believe, to coming to terms with why writers' celebrations of the nation's 1976 bicentennial were so brutally received. *Writing* was called to play a particularly important role in the public melodrama of the fall of New York City in the mid-1960s and its resurrection in the 1980s.

RENEWING THE NEW ROME OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

New York City was not the only U.S. city perceived to be in decline during the 1960s. But New York City was taken as an important index for all other central cities; thus, the decline of New York City was itself iconic. The narrative framework of "urban decline" made sense of a wide range of important yet conflicting public events and trends, and remained the dominant narrative for understanding life in the city for almost two decades. Among the most important events that this story could sort out were the various failures to renew New York successfully and completely for all citizens after the Great Depression and World War II.

The decade of the Great Depression had been followed by a decade of war and demobilization, a long stretch of time to spend in the shadows of the Naked City. After the war, elite groups returned to the grandiose plans made during the regional planning movement and the economic boom years of the 1920s as guides to reestablish and renew New York City. The older plans were modified to fit the changed material circumstances, economic trends, and shifts in personnel, power, and ideology that had occurred in the interim years. In making these adjustments, New York City's future-oriented renewers were confronted with immediate problems: long-neglected physical infrastructures (such as streets, mass transportation, and sewers) in need of repair, a severe housing shortage, and the slow but growing out-migration of factories, warehouses, and the white middle class. These problems called, on the one hand, for significant capital expenditures to rebuild infrastructures and expand housing, but the out-migrations pointed in another direction, toward a shrinking tax base and fewer revenue sources. The impending revenue crisis projected from these circumstances would not only hinder the city's renewal, but could prevent it altogether, as shrinking city funds had to be directed toward overwhelming demands already on the public agenda.

The renewal regimes in New York City are uniquely complex and difficult to untangle due to the large number of autonomous public authorities (public corporations) that are partners in those regimes. Most of the public authorities whose territory extends over New York City were created during the urban renewal era as a way to transfer certain local revenue burdens to the state budget, to coordinate the construction and maintenance of large infrastructural services (such as bridges, roads, and ports) on a regional basis, to implement specific urban renewal and economic development objectives (e.g., the Battery Park Authority), and to provide many of the basic services of modern urban life, such as public housing, hospitals, and the mass transportation system.⁶

Public authorities are administered from within the New York State apparatus and derive their power directly from the state legislature. Most are administered by a chair and an appointed board of directors. Since their funding originates either in the state capital or from their own capacity to collect revenues and sell bonds, public authorities are able to bypass many of the local public approval processes and insulate themselves to a large degree from direct electoral oversight and control. As a result, the actions taken by public authorities are very difficult for local citizens to challenge effectively, thus allowing for a large measure of “expert” discretion in their operations. Public authorities are frequently called upon to manage infrastructure and state-sponsored capital projects that elites have deemed essential, particularly in those instances where the local electorates would have voted against them.⁷

Robert Moses headed several of the key public authorities and other governmental posts with significant jurisdiction over the planning and construction of the city before 1960. His position at the top of these governmental entities is of first importance in understanding the continuity between the New York Regional Planning Board of the 1920s and the urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s. As Robert Fitch has shown, the forecasted business trends that guided, legitimated, and justified the urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s had previously been the *planning goals* of the Regional Planning Board; financial prophesies made in the late 1920s became self-fulfilling public policies in the 1950s.⁸ Although Moses and his allies claimed a deep and abiding faith in the ghostly invisible hand of the capitalist marketplace, the boards of directors of most public authorities were stacked with representatives of real estate interests, business associations and corporations, and families of inherited wealth who made

certain that the ghostly hand grabbed just the right properties and funded just the right redevelopment projects.

By successfully influencing and shaping national urban renewal funding policies in the U.S. Congress during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the political/economic regimes of New York City, including the powerful public authorities, managed to anticipate and temporarily resolve many of the urban financial crises of the 1950s. The policies and programs they shaped also provided prime positions for them to direct the renewal and transformation of New York City. The *necessity* of repairing and rebuilding the decaying urban infrastructure of the Naked City became the *opportunity* to rebuild the New Rome. Because Moses and his allied urban renewers had ghost-written portions of the national legislation, they were able to anticipate federal funding with plans already in hand. As the site where many of the first major urban renewal grants were implemented, New York City held on to its iconic status and set the terms and guidelines that many other U.S. central cities would follow in their renewal projects.

The broad historical pattern of geographic and economic change that resulted in the transfer of property taxes, revenues, and jobs outside U.S. central cities after 1950 is now retrospectively framed as “the postindustrial transformation,” which is sometimes discussed in a more positive light as “the rise of the service sector.” This process refers to movements and changes on at least three levels: international, national/regional, and local/metropolitan. A substantial decline in the manufacturing and distribution (“goods-handling”) sectors of the U.S. economy occurred at all three levels, beginning with the local/metropolitan. The goods-handling industries had previously served as important employment entry points for new unskilled workers in central cities. This part of the workforce was predominately made up of young people and recent migrants and immigrants, which included most of the African American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican male workers in New York City immediately after World War II. These are also the groups that kept New York City’s population at a relatively stable level while most other U.S. central cities lost a significant percentage of their population to the suburbs. At the same time, the financial, governmental, and service sectors experienced a dramatic growth almost equal to the fall of the goods-handling sectors. The federal urban renewal and the War on Poverty programs of the 1950s and 1960s were put forward as remedies for some of the crises and problems this structural transformation in employment had produced.

Under the federal urban renewal programs, a city used its power of eminent domain to condemn and consolidate blocks of commercially attractive properties for economic redevelopment in order to bring the central cities physically in line with the new economy. Federal funds paid for the properties and for the destruction of existing buildings, thereby allowing the cleared properties to be sold by the city government to developers at prices and in conditions comparable to those available in suburban areas, where infrastructure was newer and land was much cheaper. Developers would then, ideally, construct new buildings that would raise the municipal tax base, create jobs, and spur further economic growth. In this plan, the invisible hand of private capital would reshape the public city in economically appropriate ways that would ultimately benefit everyone. The “productive destruction” (or “slum clearance” in its earlier stages) undertaken during this period spent public funds in an attempt to support capitalist profitability in the older, tightly packed core cities of the United States.

The urban renewal projects that physically and socially reshaped New York City most dramatically were initiated between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s. They typically replaced lower-rent apartment buildings occupied by the working classes and populations of color with publicly financed middle-class and elite housing or office buildings. The renewal projects were intended to improve the city’s “business climate” and its declining municipal tax base. As a result, renewal sites were selected for their potential profitability *after* redevelopment, not because of the condition of the housing or the profitability of the existing business areas that were destroyed. Much of the worst housing in the city was left untouched, especially in neighborhoods outside the lower half of Manhattan. Other renewal sites were selected to “socially anchor” elite cultural institutions, so that new enclaves of middle- and upper-middle-income housing would give the appearance of safety and stability.⁹ This had the effect of establishing an increasing number of middle- and upper-class homes near the major economic and elite cultural institutions while dispersing poor and nonwhite populations away from these and other parts of Manhattan.¹⁰

Robert Fitch argues that the profitable midtown manufacturing district was put to death in order to renew the New Rome. The mid-Manhattan manufacturers of the 1950s were well ahead of the curve in adopting the “flexible” methods that proved successful in sustaining the manufacturing sectors of other central cities during the postindustrial era. The manufacturing district in midtown relied upon the specific interconnections and lo-

cations of industries that allowed them to sustain and share local producers, skilled professions, and specialized machinery. This configuration had developed through a long period of adaptation to this particular geographic area; a relatively stable “business ecology” had evolved over time. The system of established interdependencies, based on location, could not simply “move elsewhere” in New York City, unless all could have agreed to move together to a similarly situated place. Such a move would have required unparalleled cooperation and coordination between individual firms and could not have occurred without substantial help and regulation from governmental authorities, which were not forthcoming. Most of the firms simply left the city. In displacing midtown manufacturing, city officials and real estate developers actively destroyed many of the existing and future living-wage jobs of central-city residents. The manufacturing and goods-handling sectors were driven out not by the ghostly hand of the marketplace, but by the influence of large real estate developers seeking superprofits from speculation in new midtown office construction that could house the planned growth in the so-called FIRE sectors (finance, insurance, and real estate) and their related support services.

The shifts in postindustrial employment patterns, evident at the national level by the mid-1960s, were more drastic in New York City. From 1950 to 1970 to 1989, the city’s manufacturing employment dropped from 30 percent to 20 percent to 10 percent of the city’s total, while the combined employment in the FIRE, service, and government sectors increased from 35 percent to 48 percent to 63 percent. These economic sectors, which require a college education for good entry positions, flourished in New York City in combination with a high concentration of major corporate headquarters: 25 percent of the *Fortune* 500 firms were located in New York City during the mid-1960s. Most of those *Fortune* 500 firms relocated outside the city limits after this peak, and every mayor since that time has struggled mightily to retain those that still remain. Despite the proportional loss of corporate headquarters, New York City has continued to provide the lion’s share of their major business services: five of the “big six” accounting firms, nineteen of the world’s thirty largest advertising agencies, and one third of U.S. banks’ assets were located in New York City during the 1980s. Only those manufacturing firms with strong ties to the service, government, and/or FIRE sectors, such as printing, did not experience a distinct decline in New York City, and even this stronghold slipped as printing firms moved to nearby areas in New Jersey and Connecticut.¹¹

It is no great surprise that the evolving postindustrial economy in New York City could not and did not distribute its rewards equally, or even proportionally. On the contrary, when measured either by the number of persons living in poverty or by median and mean household income, the distribution of income between all New York City residents and the city's African American and Puerto Rican population was and remains decisively split. If we use the percentage of the Euro-American population living below the poverty line as the point of comparison, twice the percentage of African Americans live in poverty, and three times the percentage of Puerto Ricans live in poverty, with income generally following the same proportional pattern. If these figures are compared to the incomes of the surrounding suburban areas, "where the money went" becomes evident: those who have gained the most from the changes in New York City's economy—the upper-income professionals—no longer reside within the city limits.¹² The social and economic transformations of New York City did not reflect national postindustrial trends, Fitch claims: they are "aberrant." There may indeed be a systematic pattern here, but it is in no way rational or logical for a democracy, or even for a "free" market.¹³

The rapid fall of manufacturing and goods-handling and the subsequent rise in the FIRE, service, and government sectors, then, were not "natural" or "inevitable" or the only possible outcomes of the postindustrial processes in New York City. These patterns of economic change followed the "trends" identified as *appropriate policy goals* by city and regional planners since before the Great Depression and revitalized once again after World War II in the renewal and redevelopment strategies of public authorities. That is, trends were not simply followed like weather patterns on a meteorological map, but were actively shaped and promoted through public policies and expenditures. An unusual "wave" of poor and unskilled workers did not move to New York City; instead, their job prospects were run out of town.

Like the urban renewal projects, the interstate highways built after the war changed the central cities' physical layouts. In his capacity as director of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Robert Moses oversaw the planning and construction of federal interstate highways in New York City. Moses and his rival in the Port Authority used their power and positions to promote highway and bridge construction for car and truck traffic in place of mass transportation. The new highways facilitated white middle-class out-migration to suburban residential areas, initiating a daily flow of commuter traffic as well as dispersing city business firms to less-congested out-

lying areas, where they could now more easily move materials and products by truck. Although highway construction occurred in central cities throughout the country during this period, the population density, age, and geography of New York City (having an island as the urban hub), along with the number and scale of projects undertaken, mark its experience as unique.¹⁴

Moses' and his allies' grisly approach to "productive destruction" within the city's logistical context is viscerally represented in an oft-quoted remark he made later in his autobiography: "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax."¹⁵ Built through long-established, densely packed neighborhoods, the construction of the interstates disrupted hundreds of thousands of households. Many of these areas were already severely overcrowded, due to the housing shortage caused by the previous fifteen years of depression and war; demand far exceeded supply. The postwar interstate construction projects forced large numbers of lower-income residents to find new apartments during this housing crisis, further disturbing already unsettled racial and ethnic neighborhood boundaries. As working-class housing was erased from the urban landscape so that new, more (privately) profitable buildings could be erected, former residents were thrown into a discriminatory housing market where the number of lower-income units had declined in proportion to need.¹⁶

Redevelopment plans always called for relocating those displaced by new construction, but at the very most this relocation amounted to paying a lump sum to move, and a substantial number of displaced residents never even received a relocation payment. Many Euro-Americans could trade on the color of their skin in the racially segmented employment and housing markets, and thereby finance a new home (and obtain a new job) in the suburbs. Displaced African Americans and Puerto Ricans, along with those Euro-Americans who could not or would not move out of the city, simply scattered or packed into the remaining ghettos. Moses' major biographer claims that these projects displaced at least 500,000 people in fifteen years, a considerable forced migration even by the twentieth century's dismal standards.¹⁷

THE FAILURES OF RENEWAL: RERUNS OF THE NAKED CITY

New York City did not transform itself into the bright and promising New Rome after the early 1960s as had been predicted in the renewers' plans. In

fact, representations of the Naked City increasingly came to dominate the stories of New York City circulating through the mass-mediated public sphere after that time. These stories were shadows cast by the unintended consequences of elite attempts to renew the city, but they were rarely framed that way. In a social structure in which inequality is a constituent part, apocalyptic stories and predictions of social decline can justify themselves quite easily. Plenty of convincing evidence is always around.

Shifting economic trends and continuing discrimination had left many of the city's residents in increasingly impoverished circumstances. Extreme fluctuations in residential locations and public institutions (like schools) destroyed any semblance of a stable community life in many neighborhoods. A growing sense of long-term social decline, most notable in the frequently cited crime and drug addiction statistics, overwhelmed the modest gains of public policies that had primarily benefited a very small number of elite residents as well as the mass of commuting suburbanites. These are very real, material inequalities that were well documented at the time, and sustained in scholarship since that time. Awareness of these growing imbalances once again brought the possibility of the city's collapse into public view. Stories of the fall of Rome as a city and as an empire resonated with contemporary urban experiences. Still faintly glowing from its past glory as the Rome of the American empire, New York City began to predict its own fall.

Fears of social and political collapse were not exclusive to New York City during this period. An important subset of a larger panic about the "crisis" of America, the rhetoric of "crisis" framed almost every public conversation about America's cities. The financial and infrastructural crises of central cities across the nation that had been identified in the 1950s continued or abated only slightly during the 1960s. Most urban renewal schemes had, at best, mixed results and were as likely to promote corruption or make matters worse as they were to meet their intended goals. Urban renewal had done very little to stop the rush of middle- and upper-middle-class Euro-Americans, as well as retail and manufacturing businesses, from leaving the central cities. Interstate highway construction, federal home mortgage programs, and tax breaks mostly benefiting homeowners in the suburbs continued to facilitate and streamline this out-migration. As the middle class left town and the elite moved into their new, publicly financed high-rise fortresses, the "trickle down" market stimulation strategy at the foundation of urban renewal did little or nothing to address the needs of

the central cities' rising number of less affluent residents.¹⁸ If anything, the renewal projects had destroyed a significant portion of their employment and residential prospects.

At the national level, statistics indicated that the United States was enjoying an unprecedented economic boom and an expanding federal pie. King of the global hill, the United States held itself up as the planet's model for democracy. But the statistical and world-status gains reflected public actions that had primarily benefited white suburbanites, real estate interests, and businesses while central-city residents experienced widespread crises in the most basic systems of social reproduction.

After this "other America" was discovered by the commercial public sphere (newspapers, television, films, documentaries, government research, and so on) to be living in the decaying and ghettoized margins of the nation's once-magnificent cities, the "urban crisis" was increasingly represented in more sinister and cynical tones and became associated with a much wider range of problems. *Social problems* joined the list of existing financial problems as reports in the public media began to focus on racism and racial conflict, segregation, poverty, unemployment, civil disobedience, deteriorating public schools, inadequate housing, unrepaired streets and a decaying infrastructure as well as crime and drug addiction in the central cities. These conditions contributed to a growing sense of *political crisis*, as reflected in academic writings that questioned whether the central cities were even governable anymore. The political disaffection of millions visibly erupted into galvanizing riots throughout the nation's streets and urban ghettos and in widely publicized civil rights actions. These public events, through actions both peaceful and otherwise, challenged the legitimacy and ability of local, state, and federal agencies to protect democracy and to guarantee fundamentally decent living conditions for everyone. The desperate and sometimes nihilistic rhetoric of "urban crisis" manifest by the late 1960s differed dramatically from the inspired and hopeful "urban renewal" proposals of the 1950s.¹⁹

Kenneth Fox has argued that the urban riots of the 1960s occurred primarily in cities where large-scale urban renewal ("Negro removal") projects had been undertaken. He interprets the rioting as a political response by African Americans and other communities of color to the physical disruption (and other unintended consequences) caused by highway construction and urban renewal projects in and through their neighborhoods. Brutal and repressive policing practices aimed unevenly at political dissent

and minor criminal activity further inflamed passions by reinforcing these inequalities and hardships. These events transpired while the suburbs enjoyed an extended, federally funded spending spree.²⁰ The 1960s' long season of urban riots began in New York City in 1964, in the African American neighborhoods of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. During the next five years, almost every major U.S. city, except those in the Deep South, experienced at least one riot.²¹

New national laws banning discrimination in voting rights (1964), employment (1965), and housing (1968) during this period were welcomed as signs of social change and inclusion, but similar statutes had already been in place (as well as the legal loop holes to dodge them) in the larger cities outside the southern states. The War on Poverty—another federal policy reaction to the urban crisis—was effective in moving a significant number of urban residents one step over the poverty line by means of public subsidies, and in supplying badly needed health services. But these changes actually did little to address the loss of living-wage jobs in the cities, particularly for populations of color. Jobs training programs taught (usually obsolete) skills, but they did not create places to work.

After several years of struggle and protest by residents, local officials, and national experts, the disruptive urban renewal sequence of relocation, destructive clearing, and large-scale reconstruction (the fabled “New York Method”) at last gave way after the mid-1960s. As with most other aspects of urban change, the halt occurred sooner in New York City, where the authoritarian model by which earlier construction projects had been planned and implemented without public debate or approval was replaced with piecemeal, poorly planned, and timid attempts to gain community input on new proposals.²² Meanwhile, Moses' allies were constrained but not prevented from carrying on the process of productive destruction. By this time, New York City had already been radically reconstructed and changed by these earlier massive attempts at renewal and their unintended social consequences. Of course, the reconstruction of New York City after World War II did not begin nor did it end with Robert Moses. But his *signature* and those of his allies can be found everywhere in the landscape of New York City, even today. They can be read in the design of the streets, the parks, the highway system, the architecture, and in the way the economy developed.

By the late 1960s, New York City had been permanently and literally re-ordered and remapped. In conjunction with the changes in the city's econ-

omy, this remapping segmented the greater metropolitan area so that significant portions of the poor and nonwhite populations were further pushed economically, physically, and socially toward the margins of everyday city life. The physical, economic, and social transformations of the 1950s and 1960s (supposedly moved by the invisible hand of the marketplace) now operated to maintain, reinforce, and increase the social invisibility of the poor and neighborhoods of color, since their labor was no longer needed. These neighborhoods and their residents were moved outside the shared public spaces of Manhattan and disappeared from representations of New York City in the broadcast media, except as “urban problem” stories on the evening news. Amidst the steady and rapid loss of jobs, the growing division between the economically secure and the disenfranchised poor, and the pervasive fear of crime, a major renegotiation of the racialized urban social hierarchy had taken place. This renegotiation was evident in myriad ways as it developed across time: in the actions of rioters and police during the 1964 rebellion; in the obsessive recounting of crime in the city’s major newspapers; in programs to assist “ghetto youth” in finding jobs; in the day-to-day conflicts between clients and government service providers within the public programs that attempted to ameliorate urban poverty and political exclusion. But mass protests and riots disrupted the planned invisibility of these racialized processes and played upon their cultural meanings by denying their worst possibilities and forcing these issues into public view. Still, rather than seeing the protests as a justifiable call to action, the commercial public sphere simply incorporated the rising discontent into the narrative of New York City’s decline.

As the 1960s ended, New York City’s dwindling Euro-American majority and the white majority in the suburbs (both nationally and in the metropolitan area itself) came to view those central-city populations who had been left out of the economic boom as the personification of “urban problems.” The structural inequalities embedded within the postwar economic shifts, as well as the uneven and contradictory policy responses to those shifts, produced differing effects among different populations and locations. The structural shifts rewarded the majority of suburbanizing white folks well beyond the free market value of their hard work and individual efforts. But the “naturalness” of this good fortune, and its widespread enjoyment among so many whose parents had suffered through the Depression and the war, made it difficult for most of them to see the inequitable economic distributions at its core. Instead, as part of a long tradition in

U.S. cultural and political history of blaming the victim, the disparate effects of these structural flaws were sorted out in public debates and depicted as signs of the weakness, dereliction, and/or lack of moral virtue in the populations most harmed by their consequences. On the “common sense” level, the course of social relations followed an all-too-familiar trajectory: in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the urban poor were viewed somewhat sympathetically as being the victims of “urban problems”; by decade’s end, the widespread view was that the poor and people of color were themselves primarily responsible for the problems of urban America.

This process of identity reconstruction within the mass-mediated public sphere thus proceeded, in part, as a shared story about the winners and losers of the postwar boom, and why they had won or lost. For those living through the late twentieth century, these repeated explanations became such a central part of the ritualistic consumption of mainstream news and opinionated discussions that they are now just considered “common sense” views. We recognize them as stories of the deserving and the undeserving poor, as stories about welfare cheats and single mothers, as stories about those who have successfully striven to “better themselves” against enormous odds, and as emotional dramas about the good life of consumerism, safety, and comfort as enjoyed by the professional class, all of which are the stuff of so many movies, television programs, and novels each year.

URBAN YOUTH AND THE SUBWAYS: AS ROME FALLS

To better understand why public government officials decided to destroy the Freedom Train paintings in 1976, two other histories need reciting. The fall of New York City, the narrative backdrop to so many other public chronicles after the mid-1960s, was frequently told through accounts about young “criminals” and the decaying subway system (both separately and together), eventually intersecting in stories about delinquent youth on the trains. These stories set the terms by which writing would later be discussed in the commercial public sphere, and were circulating well before the writers took the trains and there established their alternative public broadcasting system.

Wild youth in the streets have long been a sign of the Naked City. Street urchins and children of the “dangerous classes,” both real and imagined, have stalked those who have found stability and hope in the promised New

Rome. But the detailed history necessary to show just how and why adults became afraid of the children is beyond the scope of this book. What follows instead is a sketch of some of the major signposts of that history.²³

Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the expected social identity of urban young people shifted from “young workers” to “adolescent students.” This dramatic identity shift is located at the juncture of several other complicated historical processes of a much wider scope. I will mention three of these historical processes to indicate the more complicated, intertwined, and everyday nature of this social change. First, the rise in clerical, technical, managerial, and professional occupations formed the material basis for an expanding middle class in the twentieth century. Without the property wealth in businesses and farms that had supported the nineteenth-century’s middle classes, the new middle-class groups drew on the cultural and economic values of schooling and took up strategies of education as a way to pass their “respectable” social status and its modest security on to the next generation. As this profession-oriented middle class established itself as the arbiter and defender of these values through local institutions (the professions, school boards, churches, city government, voluntary and charitable organizations, etc.), its cultural hegemony was also institutionalized.

Second, a ready surplus of low-wage adult immigrant labor offset the attractiveness of young people as entry-level industrial workers and craft apprentices, jobs that young people had performed in large numbers during previous periods. This shift in employment was accompanied by compulsory school attendance laws. Increasing urbanization and the efforts to “Americanize” immigrant children expanded the institutional structures of education to incorporate an even larger population and the more totalizing cultural/social task of preparing youth for adulthood. The school replaced the church as the family’s ally in socializing the young.

Third, the expansion of education was bolstered by new conceptions of youth from the upstart discipline of developmental psychology, which had emerged from the cracks and overlaps between the social sciences and medicine. This new discipline identified “adolescence” as a universally experienced, scientifically verifiable life stage occurring between roughly ages twelve and eighteen. The newly identified stage of life was characterized as a period of idealism contradicted by emotional impulsiveness, moral vulnerability, and a lack of maturity and practicality in judgment. Experts built

on older traditions of adult chaperonage among the middle and upper classes and argued that this was a period of life best spent under adult supervision within the confines of one's own age group, a ready-made task for schools as well as the Boy Scouts, summer camps, reformatories, organized athletics, Future Homemakers of America, and several other newly created youth institutions. In 1900, 7 percent of young people in the United States aged fourteen to seventeen were enrolled in high school, with the percentages in cities being typically higher. By 1920 the percentage had increased to 32 percent.²⁴ The number of adolescents in the workforce dropped in every region of the country except the South, where child labor on farms and textile mills remained significant for several more years.

These three complex historical processes, among several others, point to the ways in which young people became more and more confined and collectively managed as "adolescent students." In the new institutional settings, new social and cultural bonds were created while older bonds (the structure of youths' former identity as young workers) were eroded. Older connections to productive work roles, which would have integrated young people more securely into the daily life of their local communities, became weaker and were replaced by the new peer cultures formed within the confines of mass institutions of socialization. It was unrealistic to have expected young people to accept the extended subordinate status of "student" in exchange for a future promise of new consumer and career possibilities in just the way that middle-class adults had planned. Conflicts between adult expectations and the behavior of youth arose in part because these promises would never pay off equally for all young people in any case. Young women, young immigrants, youth of color, and working-class youth were less likely to embrace unambiguously the promise that any child can grow up to be anything he or she wants, since their experience offered too few examples of that actually occurring.

Brought together into new disciplinary institutions of mass socialization outside the intimate bonds of family members and those provided by the customary routines of work, young people constructed new practices of pleasure and status through the shared experience of living in (and being disciplined by) those institutions. The limited but nonetheless shared public spaces that opened up within the school walls became places where individual youths' resistance to professional management could be appreciated and developed. Just as schools collectivized the socialization of the young, the young collectivized their resistance to the power of adults. Peer

cultures began increasingly to act as separate social groups unto themselves. In defining the boundaries of their identities, young people tested the limits of the cooperative powers of the adults who managed them: parents, sitters, teachers, shopkeepers, employers, and police. Skills discovered or created by one generation were passed on to the next. Among these, one would find such skills as shoplifting and petty theft; techniques for exploiting the disjunctures between adult authorities (e.g., notes forged for parents or teachers); an incredible understanding of the physical landscape of the city (escape routes, hiding places, and sources of transportation); the construction of new collective identities through self-produced subcultural styles; and the creation of argots and coded languages (slangs). These practices are passed on through the fluid networks of age-based social groups. Cultural traditions, a shared culture among groups of young people, are one result.²⁵

Given the precarious economic and social position of the professional middle classes, constantly being pushed and pulled by the more powerful elites above them and the “unwashed masses” below, it is perhaps not surprising that young people became an enduring target for their displaced social anxieties. For the middle class, “mobility” could always flow in either direction. Modest ambition and accomplishment were expected, but an unpredicted tumble down the economic ladder was always a threat. Widespread moral panics over the reproduction and future stability of the established social order reflected a deep distrust of the state’s abilities to enforce moral and meritocratic ideals on an overpowering and inhumane capitalist class on the one hand, and the deprived and “criminally inclined” working class on the other. And, as innumerable success manuals and child-rearing advice books published in the twentieth century attest, the middle-class family’s faith in its own ability to successfully shape its youth in appropriate ways was shaky. At several times during this century, the future appeared to have been teetering on the edge, needing only the slightest push for the fragile social order to plunge into the abyss of social and cultural chaos. Among the most recognizable signs of impending chaos have been the perceived “outside” threats to, or deviance from within, “the younger generation.” Thus the “youth problem” (variously defined across this century) has frequently been part of the larger social project of negotiating, regulating, and reshaping the social order to bring it in line with the moral and cultural values that reassure the professional middle class.²⁶