Brownsville, Brooklyn

Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto. By Wendell Pritchett. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. 222, xi. $35.00.

Brownsville, Brooklyn is part of the series Historical Studies in Urban America which chronicles developments such as the Chicago fire of 1871 and its aftermath, the physical transformation of Manhattan between 1900 and 1940, life and politics in working class suburbs of Los Angeles between 1920 and 1965, the intersection of race and religion in the urban north, and race and housing in Chicago between 1940 and 1960. *Brownsville* differs from other titles in the series in that it covers a longer period of time—more than a century, the Civil War to the 1990s—and has a broader scope, covering the social, religious, economic, and political forces that impacted the lives of people in the community as it was transformed from lower-working-class white and Jewish to lower-class black and Latino.

I was probably asked to write this review because of my interests in both economic history and urban and regional economics. The editor was unaware of a personal connection I have with Brownsville, Brooklyn. It is where I was born and attended public school until the eighth grade. Brownsville is also the birthplace of economists: Arthur Goldberger (Wisconsin), Leon Moses (Northwestern) and Eugene Smolensky (Berkeley). Wendell Pritchett identifies other people from Brownsville both famous and infamous: the Pulitzer prize winning composer Aaron Copeland (1945 for *Appalachian Spring),* and literary critic and writer Alfred Kazin (*A Walker in the City*)[1], actor Danny Kaye, boxers Mike Tyson and Riddick Bowe, the teenage gang Amboy Dukes, and organized crime's Murder Incorporated. It was also home to Margaret Sanger's first birth control clinic (1916).

The 275 pages of text are filled with familiar places and events. Pritchett does a fine job of conveying a sense of the physical deterioration, the search for economic and personal security, and the efforts of ordinary people to create effective civic institutions. On two issues involving interracial interactions in Brownsville in the years prior to the 1960s—the role of Beth El hospital and black-white relations (both discussed below)—relations were more complex than implied by Pritchett. But Pritchett gets most of the important issues right and gives them appropriate weight.

In the years following World War II Brownsville in eastern Brooklyn was the prototype of an urban area in decline, a typical example of the "urban crisis" that was gripping major metropolitan areas where low-income blacks and Latinos were replacing affluent whites. Why was Brownsville the "poster child" for this phenomenon? As Pritchett makes clear, there was little "typical" about Brownsville. Unlike many urban communities that had experienced periods of prosperity and were now in decline, Brownsville was so-to-speak born in poverty and never achieved any great prosperity. Nevertheless it provided a base from which many were able to move up the economic and social ladder.

The book starts with the early history of Brownsville at about the time of the Civil War when what had been a farming area was divided into small lots for residences to accommodate families anxious to escape the overcrowded dilapidated tenements of the Lower East Side of Manhattan and newly arriving European immigrants. The physical characteristics of the area—low lying marshes, the presence of the city's largest garbage dump, and unattractive foul smelling local industry—made the area unsuitable for the development of upscale housing. The houses that were constructed were poorly built and did not age well. Imperfect as it was, Brownsville was an improvement over the Lower East Side and rents were low. From its earliest days Brownsville was a destination for low-income, low-skilled workers, most of whom continued to work in Manhattan, a place people left at the first opportunity. Over the next century those whose fortunes improved migrated out to better areas of New York. The exodus of whites who benefited from the economic expansion after World War II was merely a continuation of a long-term trend.

[1] Kazin, *Walker*.

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Blacks began moving into the area in the early 1900s, finding it a refuge from rampant housing discrimination in the rest of the city. They too were attracted by the rents which were about 30 percent less than in Manhattan. Over the next four decades the black population grew but Brownsville remained a mostly Jewish community served by religious and civic institutions attuned to their religious and civic needs. Pritchett notes that blacks and Jews lived together peacefully. This is true in the sense that there were no race riots in the area or notable instances of white-black violence. But the situation was mostly one of coexistence with a smattering of significant interaction, not a full embrace across racial lines. Parts of the community were entirely white and most multi-family buildings had either all white or all black tenants, though some streets had black and white residents. Some neighborhood organizations, most notably the Brownsville Boys Club (BBC) and the Brownsville Neighborhood Council (BNC), were biracial.

The discussion of the Brownsville Boys Club conveys a sense of the mission of the organization. Founded in 1940 by a group of local boys in need of recreation facilities the BBC developed into a model youth organization governed by its membership and sponsor of numerous recreational and intervention programs that sheltered local boys of all races from the negative influences, which proliferated in the area; it became an important and respected advocate for Bronwsville's boys. One of its founders, Irving "Hooker" Levine (father-in-law of Mary Tyler Moore) went on to a distinguished national career in intergroup relations; others went on to successful careers in the law, business, education, and religion. Pritchett's discussion of how control of the BBC was wrested from its organizers by a coalition of powerful adults is an account of urban power politics New York style.

At the end of World War II Brownsville activists turned their attention to improving the local housing stock and providing better economic conditions for its residents. One of the ironies of Brownsville history is that when city officials finally turned their attention to the needs of the area they concluded there was not much worth saving and commenced to demolish much of the existing housing, replacing it with massive public housing projects. The selection of Brownsville as a place to concentrate public housing was made easier because of the relatively low cost of the property demolished but, as Pritchett points out, it also served the purpose of keeping nonwhites out of neighborhoods where residents objected to their presence. Moreover, Brownsville had a positive appetite for public housing. Brownsville leaders lobbied hard for public housing, believing that government should intervene when the market failed. They looked upon public housing as a way to stabilize the community and maintain a substantial white population. In the years immediately following World War II, Brownsville's public housing was racially mixed. Bureaucratic bungling and the relocation of whites to more affluent neighborhoods tipped the ratio of the public-housing tenant population more and more towards minority, and by the 1960s Brownsville, which was in 1940 the largest concentration of Jews in the United States, became majority black and Puerto Rican.

Pritchett paints a vivid account of the many forces at work during the 1952 strike at Beth El hospital. In that year service workers at the local voluntary hospital were organized by Local 1199 of the Hospital Workers of America. After a two-month struggle the workers succeeded in gaining recognition for the union and higher wages. The struggle brought together elements of New York's liberal community and appeared to signal the birth of a northern civil rights movement that crossed racial lines. The Hospital Workers union was led by Jews, the rank and file at Beth El was mostly black and Latino. In assessing the significance of the Beth El conflict, Pritchett credits the strike with awakening Brownsville to the possibility of organization and helping to bring about the political maturation of the now mostly black and Puerto Rican community.

Relations between blacks and Beth El were not good prior to the strike. It is an issue not discussed by Pritchett but it may have exacerbated tensions between minority residents who worked at Beth El and the professional staff. The hospital opened in 1921 to serve the needs

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of the people in southern and eastern Brooklyn. While I was growing up in Brownsville there was a common belief that blacks were not welcome at Beth El. A potentially life-threatening experience I had there as a patient in the early 1940s is etched in my memory. I was brought there with acute appendicitis and left in the emergency room for six hours before being transferred to the public hospital, Kings County, where emergency surgery was performed two hours later. Happily the situation has changed and Beth El, now renamed Brookdale, enjoys a more favorable reputation.

Differences between the multiracial labor struggle at Beth El and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school strike six years later are discussed in detail by Pritchett. The Beth El strike turned out to be merely basic training for a much more bitter battle over local control of the schools of Ocean Hill–Brownsville, one that pit a largely Jewish group of teachers and the United Federation of Teachers led by the combative Albert Shanker against a mostly black and Latino group of parents.

What started as a social experiment in community control of schools erupted into a monumental struggle, pitting teachers' authority and security on one hand against the educational demands of parents on the other. Unlike the Beth El Hospital strike, which enjoyed consensus support across racial and religious lines, the conflict over the schools in Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools exposed divisions in the community that were not previously apparent. Until then blacks and whites lived side by side in peaceful coexistence, even with many examples of genuine common purpose. The confrontation over the schools was something new in Brownsville. Ugly recriminations of anti-Semitism and racism came to the surface as the mostly black and Puerto Rican parents were locked in a no-holds-barred battle with the teachers union. When finally settled in 1969 the confrontation left permanent scars. In the years that followed, Brownsville declined precipitously and by 1970 fell to the very bottom of New York City communities in terms of poverty, crime, delinquency, and health.

The 1970s marked a low point in the history of Brownsville. But as Pritchett recounts, a change came over the community beginning in the early 1980s as a new leadership arose. In 1981 an ecumenical group of religious leaders developed the "Nehemiah Plan," named after the biblical prophet who rebuilt Jerusalem. The clerics concluded that home ownership was essential for the stability of Brownsville. With the assistance of a veteran developer they embarked in 1982 on a program that by the end of the century built more than 2,200 two- and three-bedroom homes, the first new housing in Brownsville in more than half a century. And for the first time in more than 60 years the population of Brownsville increased, by more than 10,000. More than 40 percent of the new homeowners were former public housing tenants, who reaped the benefits of the strong housing market that increased the value of their homes by 30 percent in the late 1990s. Commercial development accompanied the rise in population, as a new mostly immigrant merchant class invested in the area, aided by public subsidies. It is too early to claim that a renaissance is taking place in Brownsville but negative trends have been reversed.

Although the early development of Brownsville was not typical of modern urban communities the postwar pattern of decline was common. Populations left older cities for more modern housing and less dense developments in the suburbs. Federal policy aided and abetted this dispersal by subsidizing expressways, water and sewage systems, and veterans' mortgages, and by favorable income tax treatment of mortgage interest and property taxes. Urban renewal projects demolished more housing than they replaced. Retailing followed populations and downtowns declined.[2] Labor markets placed a premium on better educated workers as traditional manufacturing jobs were either reduced or eliminated by technology or lost to foreign competition. The share of jobs represented by the FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) sector grew.

[2] For a historical discussion see Banfield, *Un-heavenly City*, chapters 1 and 2.

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The plight of places such as Brownsville was worsened by the financial crises that befell cities such as New York and Cleveland. The fight of public employees for job tenure, higher wages, and benefits overwhelmed a city also facing rising costs of providing services to a more dependent population. The intensity of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school battle is partly a reflection of this.

Abandonment, demolition, and urban renewal have changed the landscapes of areas such as Brownsville. Vacant land made the development of single-family homes possible. The future for Brownsville is likely to be lower density development. The area is fortunate to be served by passenger rail. Land use and employment patterns in major cities have changed a great deal in the past 30 years.[3]

Pritchett has given us a careful, well-documented history of an American urban community. The book makes an important contribution to social history and is a sensitive study of intergroup relations. The tribulations and successes of immigrants, first from Europe and later from the American South and the Caribbean, comprise a very American story.

MARCUS ALEXIS, *Northwestern University and Stanford University*

[3] For a discussion of changes in Chicago see Alexis and McDonald, "Changing Economy."

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