

Intervals - Episode 16

Season 1: Intervals of Public Health
Lecture Title: "'Dirty Discrimination':
Sanitation and Civil Rights Protest in New
York, 1962-1970"

Q+A Taping Date: February 5, 2021

Upload Date: July 21, 2021

Guest Lecturer: Tina Peabody

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Preferred Citation Format

Tina Peabody, "'Dirty Discrimination': Sanitation and Civil Rights Protest in New York, 1962-1970," and Q+A interview with Christopher Brick, *Intervals*, podcast audio and transcript, July 21, 2021, <https://www.oah.org/programs/listen-to-history/>.

Initial Verbatim Transcript - May Contain Typos

Introduction

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Hello everyone and welcome back once again to the *Intervals* podcast. We are a public humanities initiative of the Organization of American Historians - OAH for short - and I'm your host, Christopher Brick, here on behalf of the OAH Committee on Marketing and Communications, and here as well to welcome Tina Peabody to deliver our sixteenth guest lecture of season 1.

Tina's joining us today from the State University of New York at Albany, where she's currently

dissertating on the social and economic history of waste management in postwar New York City.

Her talk today on the history of sanitation and civil rights protest draws on some of that research, as does her recently published article, "Marketing a Nuisance," which explores sanitation at the 1939 World's Fair.

The historical memory and cultural representation of the civil rights movement most reliably conjures imagery of attack dogs, firehoses, shotguns, sheriff's deputies, and burning crosses used to make Jim Crow a violent reality in the lives of Black people in the American south. Tina's research though turns an eye to a very different setting for these confrontations: New York. And she directs our attention instead to the way that Black and Puerto Rican activists in NYC linked their social justice work to a critique of and movement against environmental racism. Groups like the Congress of Racial Equality, the Young Lords, and the Brothers all surface in her talk because they protested insufficient refuse collection, vacant lots, dilapidated housing.

The movement's campaigns and actions that her work documents reveal that civil rights activists in New York recognized issues of sanitation and health as part of the larger system of Jim Crow segregation, whose de facto reach extended far beyond the Deep South or the old Confederacy.

And here she is, Tina Peabody on "Dirty Discrimination: Sanitation and Civil Rights Protest in New York, 1962-1970."

Lecture

TINA PEABODY: For many of us, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States is marked by southern struggles over voting rights, and racial integration of schools and public spaces. When we think of the most significant moments of the Movement, they tend to be events in the south, like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock 9, or the march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama.

All of these are critically important moments in civil rights history, but today I want to talk a little bit about what civil rights struggles looked like in northern cities.

Specifically, I want to talk about protests in the 60s and early 70s over inadequate garbage collection in New York City by African American and Puerto Rican civil rights activists. I will focus primarily on two protests: Operation Clean Sweep by the Brooklyn Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality or CORE in 1962 and the garbage offensive by the Young Lords in East Harlem in 1969. And I will end by talking about how the Young Lords in particular helped influence the growing popularity of burning garbage in protest as the city's economic climate worsened in the late 60s and early 70s.

At first glance, protests over sanitary issues like garbage might seem relatively unimportant compared to voting rights or segregation, but I would argue these protests help us better understand the civil rights movement in a few ways. First, talking about sanitation demonstrates just how deeply embedded racial inequality was in the United States,

touching even the most mundane facets of life - like getting your garbage collected, or keeping your streets clean.

Second, these protests demonstrate the role of the urban north in the broader civil rights movement, and how these struggles were linked to southern civil rights campaigns. In recent years, civil rights historians have argued that focusing on the southern civil rights campaigns alone gives the false impression that Jim Crow segregation was non-existent in the north, and prevents us from seeing the connections between southern civil rights campaigns and the urban unrest that emerged in the late 60s.

The sanitation protests launched by CORE in particular demonstrate that northern activists recognized issues like poor housing, rats, and dirty streets as part of the larger system of segregation, and saw their activism as intrinsically linked to civil rights struggles in the south. Finally, as historian David Stradling has argued, these protests are a reminder that the urban crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s was not only economic, but environmental.

The urban crisis manifested not just in dollar figures, but in physical conditions in poor, urban neighborhoods - in overflowing refuse cans, in growing rat populations, and, as we'll see, in the smell of burning rubbish.

Now, what led to these sanitary protests? Well, many of the sanitation problems these protests addressed had their roots in demographic changes to neighborhoods like East Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Brownsville after World War II,

especially the increases in African American and Puerto Rican populations. Puerto Ricans and African Americans had already begun settling in New York City in significant numbers between 1910 and 1930, both coming in search of economic opportunity. But these migration patterns accelerated between the 1940s and 1960s.

In these decades, the racial makeup of New York City changed dramatically. One estimate is that New York City went from roughly 7% non-white in 1940 to 16% Latino and over 20% black in 1970.

These demographic shifts came at a time when New York City was beginning to experience some of the economic difficulties facing cities in the northeast and mid-west in an age of growing suburbanization and deindustrialization.

Manufacturing had historically provided a lot of the working-class jobs in New York City, but these industries increasingly were leaving for areas where operating costs were lower, like the suburbs, the south, or even abroad. The migration of industries became particularly troubling in the late 60s and early 70s, when New York City lost about a half a million jobs. In this period, many middle-class residents moved to the suburbs as well, encouraged by improved transportation systems, federal policies supporting home ownership, and, in some cases, by discomfort with racial change.

Meanwhile, discrimination limited housing options for black and Latino newcomers in New York City, whether through restrictive covenants that barred

minorities from owning homes or renting in particular neighborhoods or through redlining, which deemed minority or mixed neighborhoods too risky for mortgage loans.

Concerns about sanitation were directly connected to these patterns of housing discrimination. African Americans and Latinos were often forced into areas with aging housing stock that was in need of repair, making them susceptible to pests like rats or roaches. As a result, many of these areas also became infamous for filthy streets, rats, and littered vacant lots in the 50s and 60s. The press shared salacious photos of filthy streets in neighborhoods like East Harlem, and accounts of children being bitten by rats, suggesting a sense of crisis. Volunteer cleanliness organizations and city officials tried to encourage clean streets with educational campaigns and cleanliness drives, but the focus tended to be on the individual responsibility of the residents and not the particular challenges they faced.

They rarely suggested that New York City's Department of Sanitation should be providing increased garbage collection or questioned whether landlords were providing needed support like sufficient garbage cans, for instance. Sanitation protests by African American and Puerto Rican activists instead pointed to neglect by the Department of Sanitation and landlords and framed clean communities as a right for all of the city's residents.

The Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality or CORE was one of the first to call attention to inadequate refuse collection by the

Department of Sanitation in a protest they referred to as "Operation Clean Sweep." Operation Clean Sweep began with an investigation of sanitation problems in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. CORE found that predominantly white neighborhoods in Brooklyn with comparable or lower population density to Bedford Stuyvesant were receiving garbage collection five days per week, while the predominantly African American Bedford Stuyvesant received three days per week.

Other neighborhoods that received three-day collection like Bedford Stuyvesant, meanwhile, were overwhelmingly white, and all had lower population density.^{xii} The Department of Sanitation was not the only culprit, however. CORE member Arnold Goldwag also argued that landlords often did not provide their tenants with sufficient garbage cans, for instance.^{xiii} Brooklyn CORE argued that sanitation problems in Bedford Stuyvesant were an issue of systemic discrimination and connected their struggles to the civil rights movement in the south. In a flier for Operation Clean Sweep, they referred to Bedford Stuyvesant's sanitation problems as "dirty discrimination."

An article on Operation Clean Sweep similarly demanded investigation of the "jim crow odors coming from the Sanitation Dep't." In short, CORE saw the push for daily garbage collection as only one part of a larger fight against discrimination. Demonstrating the broad array of housing and sanitation issues facing Bedford Stuyvesant, they demanded not only five-day garbage collection, but rat and pest extermination, proper heating, well-lit hallways, apartment repairs, fire hazard control, and cleaning of littered lots.

Brooklyn CORE members negotiated with city officials and the Department of Sanitation, but this was ultimately unsuccessful. Brooklyn CORE members Oliver and Marjorie Leeds started by initiating a letter writing campaign to city authorities. Eventually, CORE also sent a delegation led by Marjorie Leeds to the Department of Sanitation on August 24, 1962. According to Marjorie's notes about the meeting, the delegation was assured that there was a request for a budgetary increase in the works for additional service.

Then, subtly placing responsibility on the people of Bedford Stuyvesant for the problem, Sanitation officials also suggested that they create a committee to help make the area "cooperative" with the Sanitation Department. The delegation was also advised to report any littered lots they found, so the Department could try to force private owners to clean them up.^{*i*} The delegation wanted action by September 8.^{**} By September 13, however, sanitation official Henry Liebman only repeated promises about giving the situation "careful consideration and study," and added that the Sanitation Department needed an increased budget for equipment and personnel to provide more frequent service.

When negotiations failed, Brooklyn CORE turned to direct action. On September 15, 1962 CORE members followed after the Department of Sanitation collection trucks, picked up the refuse left behind, and planned to dump it in view of city officials.

According to one account, the refuse they collected was enough to fill two trucks and a station wagon. The police, who had purposely been made aware of

the plan by CORE members, assumed the protesters would dump the garbage on City Hall in Manhattan and blocked the Brooklyn Bridge, but the group instead dumped it on the steps of Borough Hall in Brooklyn and picketed with signs reading "Operation Clean Sweep" and "Taxation Without Sanitation."

The *New York Times* reported they littered the steps with "several cartons of refuse," mattresses, a rusted ice box, rugs, and bedsprings. Marjorie Leeds, a white member of Brooklyn CORE, accepted the official summons for littering on behalf of the group, though when she insisted she would rather go to jail than pay a fine, her case was dismissed.

Operation Clean Sweep did get the attention of Brooklyn's Borough President Abe Stark. On September 18, Stark said he would work to improve service in Bedford Stuyvesant, and had been in touch with Department of Sanitation Commissioner Frank Lucia. Stark also made inspections in the months after Operation Clean Sweep, and called for more stringent fines on landlords, noting that, on average, fines for violations in Brooklyn were far less than those in Manhattan.

During the inspections, Stark also questioned Commissioner Lucia about overflowing garbage cans and a rubbish-filled lot, reportedly telling Lucia he needed to increase collection if three days a week was not enough. In December, though, Brooklyn CORE's *The North Star* reported that they had been unable to contact the Mayor since Operation Clean Sweep, and there had been only "token improvements."

Operation Clean Sweep continued into 1963. In January of that year, Abe Stark announced a new

housing plan for Brooklyn, which included five-day per week garbage collection. Just after Stark released the plan, Oliver Leeds wrote to Mayor Robert Wagner to plead for sanitation improvements. He wrote, "It is our view that a community as overcrowded as ours, should get preferential treatment from the agencies of the City, and not prejudicial treatment as is obviously the case in the instance of the Sanitation Department."

Yet, sanitation officials continued to simply say the budget would not allow for increased collection and promised to make requests for budget increases. By May, the Executive Committee of the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council supported CORE's effort by dismissing the persistent excuses about budgets and lack of personnel. They wrote: "While we do not want to deprive anyone of needed service, we can no longer accept the logic which requires that we though more deserving must continue to be deprived."

Connecting their struggles explicitly to those in the south they added, "This argument has too often been used in the South and elsewhere to prevent equality of treatment for minority groups." Six - day per week collection was eventually announced the following August, roughly a year after Operation Clean Sweep began.

After Operation Clean Sweep, other CORE groups similarly took up the issue of sanitary services. In August 1963, the New York University or NYU chapter of CORE dumped garbage near City Hall to protest conditions in Lower East Side tenements on Eldridge Street. In February, NYU CORE had discovered that the buildings, which were occupied

primarily by African Americans and Puerto Ricans were in disrepair, filthy, and infested by rats and roaches.

As had been the case with Brooklyn CORE's negotiations with city officials, NYU CORE failed to get results despite attempts to get the private owners to make repairs, so they swept up refuse from behind the buildings, and loaded it up in a truck to dump at the Municipal Building.

As the *Daily News* reported, the load of refuse "included old mattresses, springs, broken furniture, shattered doors, a battered doll and more than a dozen dead rats in cages on one side of the vehicle." Police intercepted them, but the group still dumped the load near City Hall, and nearly 100 picketers shouted "Freedom now! We will not be moved!" and "Who do they protect? Slumlords must go!" In the end, eight protesters were arrested and given jail time, though CORE members pointed out the irony that the owner of the properties had not served any time, despite being cited for numerous housing violations.

Sanitation would remain a persistent issue in the 1960s, despite the federal government's attempts to address the growing crisis in U.S. cities. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society invested money in urban areas as part of the War on Poverty, for instance, and for many years New York City depended on this funding to help support services for the poor. The Johnson Administration did also try to address some major sanitary problems in cities, including the prevalence of rats. Highly publicized accounts of rat bites in Harlem encouraged the Johnson Administration to support the passage of the Rat Extermination Act of 1967, for instance, despite

the resistance and mockery of southern members of congress.

Overall, however, the funding for the program was limited - not enough to address the larger structural problems with housing and sanitation that fostered rat populations in the first place. New York's Bureau of Pest Control, created in 1964, tried to control rat populations and rat bites, but as the Bureau's Director told the *New Yorker* in 1968, he could not solve the problem if garbage was not collected or if rat holes were not boarded up.

Rat extermination was also more complicated in apartment buildings with multiple dwellings, where landlord or superintendent cooperation was necessary to address the issue. While the Bureau of Pest Control advised that garbage cans needed tight fitting lids to prevent rats, for instance, landlords were often accused of not providing sufficient lids or garbage cans for tenants.

Initially, the election of Mayor John Lindsay in 1965 also raised hopes that civil rights issues would be addressed in New York City, but that optimism soon faded. As a former republican U.S. Senator, Lindsay had an impressive record on civil rights, including taking part in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At a time when the Republican party was increasingly moving to the right, Lindsay pushed his party to support desegregation, and promote legislation against lynching, poll taxes, and other forms of discrimination.

During the mayoral election and afterward, the young Mayor's administration was an increasing

presence on the streets of poor neighborhoods, both through Lindsay's frequent walking tours of the city and especially with the creation of the Urban Action Task Force (UATF).

The head of the task force, Barry Gottehrer, developed teams in troubled neighborhoods to forge connections between local organizations and administration officials who could address particular concerns. Yet, riots in Harlem and Brooklyn in 1967, and the increasingly radical organizing by poor and minority groups by the late 60s suggested that Lindsay's efforts were not translating into concrete action. Part of the problem was that during Lindsay's time in office, the effects of deindustrialization and suburbanization on New York City's economy were only worsening. By the late 60s, New York City was seeing growing rates of both crime and unemployment.

Given the limitations of the Great Society and Mayor Lindsay's attempts to address poverty and the worsening economic situation in New York City, it is perhaps unsurprising that the critique of sanitary services CORE initiated would become more forceful by the late 1960s. The best example of this is the "garbage offensive" launched by the Puerto Rican civil rights group the Young Lords in East Harlem in 1969. East Harlem had been a major center of Puerto Rican migration after World War II, and as early as the late 1940s had garnered concern about inadequate housing and littered streets.

Like CORE, the Young Lords accused the Department of Sanitation of providing inadequate service to East Harlem and they similarly rejected the idea

that sanitation problems were simply individual irresponsibility. Yet, their approach to the issue was decidedly more confrontational than CORE's, focusing less on negotiation than causing a stir, even going so far as to block traffic and antagonize police.

The New York City Young Lords Organization was formed by a group of college students in the summer of 1969.^{liv} They were part of a generation of Latino and African American students who had entered college in greater numbers because of programs to increase diversity in state and city universities in the 1960s, and, like many others, they became politically active during their college experience. In June 1969, they became a branch of the Young Lords Organization in Chicago.

The New York Young Lords not only aimed to organize communities, but also wanted a revolutionary overhaul of the system which socially and economically disadvantaged Puerto Ricans. Through the garbage offensive, the group would come to recognize that sanitation was part of that larger system, in the same way CORE saw poor sanitation as part of the system of Jim Crow segregation. As Young Lord Iris Morales later wrote, "the disdain and systemic neglect was visible on the streets overflowing with trash and sent the message, 'Puerto Ricans are garbage.'"

Initially, however, the Young Lords did not see garbage as a revolutionary issue. In the summer of 1969, members of the newly formed New York branch came to East Harlem to ask residents what they could do to help the community.^{lviii} The group brought with them a revolutionary ideology. Founding member Miguel "Mickey" Melendez later

recalled that the group only ventured into East Harlem after studying the works of thinkers like Mao and Ho Chi Minh. Melendez wrote, "We believed that the working class should have a greater voice in shaping society. It was as simple as that...the millions of American workers who earned their living by selling their labor should be liberated from having to carry on their shoulders the few rich ones."

To the group's surprise, the people of East Harlem were not as interested in revolution as garbage. Mickey Melendez later recalled how one after another, the residents of East Harlem emphasized the stench of trash left piled in the streets. Some of the members had trouble holding back the urge to laugh. Felipe Luciano, who would go on to become the group's first chairman, later admitted that he felt the garbage issue was "very unromantic. I couldn't imagine myself leading a march for garbage when there were so many other issues out there."

Still, after the initial meeting with East Harlem residents, the Young Lords began sweeping up garbage from the streets, but were frustrated by what they saw as the lack of cooperation from city officials. Though I have not found any evidence of correspondence or negotiations with the Department of Sanitation as was the case with Operation Clean Sweep, the Lords did forcefully request that the city support their clean-up efforts.

On July 27, some of the members, including Mickey Melendez and Felipe Luciano, decided to go to the Department of Sanitation to demand supplies. According to Melendez's account, when the group was refused the necessary equipment, Luciano and the

others in the group helped steal ten Department of Sanitation brooms. Then, the group blocked an intersection with garbage. The problem, Mickey Melendez later recalled was "that the trucks of the Department of Sanitation did not come. When at last they did, half the garbage was left scattered all over the place. It was a slap in the face."

A couple of weeks later, the Young Lords decided that if the Sanitation Department would not collect the garbage they swept, they would use the refuse they accumulated to get the city's attention. On Sunday, August 17, the group, accompanied by some members of the community, swept up garbage and dumped it into the streets, blocking traffic and attracting the attention of cops. Melendez recalled that, "The garbage formed a five-foot high wall across six lanes of Third Avenue." Their initial actions built upon the strategy of Operation Clean Sweep, but after blocking the streets with refuse, the garbage offensive took a more confrontational approach. The Lords and residents began to set fire to the garbage, turn over cars, and even confront police on the scene.

According to Young Lord Pablo Guzman, when residents noticed how the group was being treated by the police, they began to pelt the cops from their windows. The Organization also issued four demands: regular garbage collection, a set number of brooms and trash cans for each block, more jobs for Puerto Ricans in the Sanitation Department, and higher starting pay for sanitation workers. The episode not only garnered press coverage for the emerging group, but, according to Melendez, it encouraged Mayor John Lindsay to send his special

assistant, Arnaldo Segarra, to East Harlem to address the issue. The Young Lords continued to hold similar protests on Sundays until September 2, 1969.

The impact of the garbage offensive is difficult to judge. On the one hand, it seems clear the garbage offensive did not solve the sanitation problems in East Harlem. However, Mickey Melendez argued that after the garbage offensive, burning refuse became a popular technique to force the Department of Sanitation to pick up trash. He later wrote, "...every time the garbage in our neighborhood was ignored, the people would simply fight back by applying the same tactics: more garbage would be piled up and burned in the street to force firefighters and other city authorities to pay attention to this problem." In 1970, the *New York Times* attributed the use of garbage burning in protest to the Young Lords, calling it "a technique the Young Lords popularized to call attention to the sporadic, and sometimes invisible, activities of the Sanitation Department in poor neighborhoods."

Evidence supports these claims that garbage burning did not die out as a protest technique after 1969, and in fact became a frequent tool of poor minority communities to demand sanitary services. Between 1970 and 1971, residents of Brownsville in Brooklyn launched high-profile garbage burning protests as well. Much like East Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, Brownsville had changed demographically after WWII, transitioning to a largely African American and Latino neighborhood by the 1960s, and its sanitation problems were particularly dire.

Brownsville had once received 6 day per week trash pick-up, but by 1970 was reportedly receiving irregular collection roughly twice per week. One sign of the problems with sanitation was the prevalence of rats. In 1968, the Bureau of Pest Control considered Brownsville a Phase One area, which designated a section of the city where high rat populations and high incidents of rat bites converged. Brownsville's sanitation troubles were worsened by urban renewal projects.

In the 1960s, it was estimated that 500 buildings in Brownsville had been demolished for urban renewal projects, but in 1973 the State Study Commission reported that none of those projects had been completed. This left a littered landscape that many equated to a war zone. In 1970 one article described Brownsville as "beset with rubble-strewn lots, abandoned and burned-out buildings and empty storefronts." Another article noted that sections "marked for urban renewal, are vacant hulks of buildings and rubble-strewn lots, looking much like blitzed European cities of the nineteen-forties."

The spring of 1970 began with peaceful protests over the sanitation problems in Brownsville by the Brooklyn Community Council, but by June the protests had become more combative. On June 11, 1970, there were three days of disturbances and rubbish burning. The trouble began when two men, Richard Green and Charles Wheel, were arrested for allegedly burning refuse in the middle of Sutter Avenue. The arrests drew an angry crowd, and violence broke out, during which rubbish was strewn in the street, garbage and abandoned building were burned, and stores were looted.

Though the initial focus was sanitation, there was also tension between residents and the police and the Fire Department. The car of the officers that arrested Green and Wheel was firebombed, for instance. According to the Fire Department, police told them to wait to respond to the fires until the area was secured, but one resident claimed that when she reported the fires, she was told the Fire Department did not care if her block burned to the ground.

Protests involving rubbish burning continued in 1971, and increasingly strained relations between the Brownsville community and firefighters. Between May 5 and 6 1971, protests broke out in response to state cuts in public assistance like Medicaid, food stamps, and anti-narcotic programs. Residents used trash and abandoned automobiles to block intersections, and set rubbish fires along with other major blazes. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that there had been 120 fires in Brownsville during these protests, 32 of which were rubbish fires.

Firemen also reported being confronted and pelted with debris as they battled the blazes, and the following day, union representatives from the Uniformed Firefighter's Association and Fire Officer's Association announced they would not enter riot zones unless they were provided police protection.

Rubbish fires continued to break out in Harlem and East Harlem as well. On August 4 1970, residents on two blocks of 111th and 110th streets set fire to garbage, old furniture and bedding, and even abandoned cars in protest of inadequate garbage collection. As in Brownsville, tensions were high

between residents and city officials on the scene. Firemen did not immediately respond to fight the fires on 111th Street, and the police claimed this was because firefighters had been "bombed with missiles" earlier in the morning when responding to an abandoned automobile fire.

On 110th street, residents reportedly warned the firemen "that their truck would be burned if they tried to put out the fire." The *New York Times* reported that after Sanitation officials and firefighters spoke to residents on 110th Street, the Department of Sanitation cleaned the block, and promised to help residents with a clean-up drive. Ten days later, uncollected garbage was heaped in the streets on Lenox Avenue in Harlem because the Sanitation Department had failed to collect garbage for two weeks. Sanitation Department officials responding to the protest were reportedly harassed before being allowed to clean the area. In February 1971, residents of an apartment building in the South Bronx set a rubbish fire in the street to protest that they had no heat, and reportedly formed a "human barricade" to prevent firemen from fighting the fire.

The city's response to these garbage burning protests was mixed. In light of the protests in both East Harlem and Brownsville, Lindsay asked his Urban Action Task Force Units to submit weekly reports in early June 1970 to help prevent similar crises. He also made a walking tour of Brownsville after the protests in June 1970, sympathizing with the frustrations of residents, but also not condoning the violence. The Sanitation Department also reportedly sent 13 collection trucks to Brownsville and cleaned up 135 tons of refuse on June 12, 1970 and provided extra collection in the

weeks following. Still, two weeks after the June 1970 disturbances in Brownsville, the *New York Times* reported the area was "filthy."

The Department of Sanitation also decided to cut service to some areas of the city from three days per week to two in August 1970, arguing this schedule was one they could realistically meet, and would ultimately improve service. This had the unintended effect of inciting backlash against the protestors. Some residents and the Queens Borough President felt they were being needlessly deprived of services because of the unrest. One Queens Councilman said some residents in his district threatened to throw *their* garbage in the street.

So, what can we take away from these sanitation protests. For one thing, while garbage dumping and garbage burning might have seemed chaotic and sometimes violent to observers, these tactics served a definite purpose. Residents of Brooklyn and Harlem seemingly learned an important lesson from CORE and the Young Lords- dramatic demonstrations seemed to force city authorities to pay attention to them quickly. Brooklyn CORE had gone through a long process of negotiation with the Sanitation Department, and the Young Lords had also attempted to get the Department's cooperation with their cleanup effort in East Harlem, but neither group had gotten immediate results this way.

However, dumping refuse, rubbish burning, blocking traffic, and similar tactics had often forced the Sanitation Department to provide needed services. In this sense, at least, many of these demonstrations succeeded, at least temporarily. As one shrewd commentator on the June 1970 disturbances in Brownsville put it, the poor

recognized that it was difficult to get city or national governments "to react unless you make loud noises." He added, "It was the act of people who felt that the city had abandoned them; the city could not or would not collect the stinking piles of garbage, and those people reacted the same way that the middle class would have reacted: they did the job themselves."

Yet, the continuing struggles over the course of the 1960s and 1970s also suggested that at best the protests were a temporary fix. City officials might provide needed service in the short term, but it would not solve major structural issues that contributed to the problem in the first place. Over the course of the 1970s, economic conditions would only worsen in New York City. The election of Richard Nixon to the White House in 1968 marked the end of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and its federal investment in urban anti-poverty programs, making it more difficult for New York City to make ends meet.

By 1975, New York City teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. Though New York City's economy would eventually recover, the road to recovery came with a price: deep cuts to city jobs and services like sanitation, health care, and education. In short, while burning refuse and blocking streets could garner attention, it did not reverse the decades of discrimination, suburbanization, and deindustrialization that plagued New York City's communities. As historian Greg Mittman once wrote of the Young Lords garbage offensive, "The Mayor's office got the message. But the garbage carried away by the city's trucks did not remove conditions of despair."

Q+A

[segue from lecture]

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: "Garbage and the Making of New York City" is the subtitle of the dissertation that Tina adapted into this talk that she just delivered and I was curious to ask her: did garbage really make New York City? Let's find out.

[beginning of group conversation]

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Tina Peabody, welcome to the podcast!

TINA PEABODY: Thank you so much!

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Your talk kind of makes the case that maybe there isn't a Democratic or Republican way to pick up the garbage, but there is kind of a racist or antiracist way to pick up the garbage. And I don't want to be too reductive here, so by all means push back on that if I have that wrong, but that's -- would you say that's a fair characterization of the kind of case you're making and for why this kind of history matters?

TINA PEADBODY: I absolutely-- I think that's fair. Part of the whole point of my, excuse me, larger dissertation is to show the through lines that this is something that was consistently an issue. That it wasn't just the civil rights era, right, but that every generation struggled with how to fairly distribute social services, like sanitation, and

who was going to bear the burden of particularly disposal. And, you know, in the late nineteenth century, the people who tended to bear that burden were immigrants who worked in the waste traits, right, in the sense that they had to labor with it but also, you know, that their neighborhoods, the tenement neighborhoods that they lived in were the ones that were criticized for being not clean enough, for not having sufficient sanitary services and you see that repeated again in the 60s.

And I think the consistent through line is that middle class and upper-class New Yorkers, predominantly white, not necessarily, whiteness is not a consistent category over that period, but in general, you know, white, wealthier New Yorkers were very successful in challenging the city's disposal techniques when it might inconvenience them. They were very insistent that waste facilities not be located near their homes, right. They wanted to be sure that they could depend on cleanliness in their city.

So, you know, they were a very successful sort of maybe lobbying group is too strong, but certainly cleanliness organizations throughout the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, they had strong connections to the Department of Sanitation in the city and they had sort of a political power and I think not necessarily always intentionally, but they certainly used to ensure that their neighborhoods would be clean.

And oftentimes they used their platform to criticize tenement neighborhoods, if you're talking about the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, for uncleanliness, and then later Puerto Rican, African American communities for uncleanliness. And, you know, they didn't stop to consider always whether collection services, you know, disposal services, whether those city services were being distributed fairly.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: When does your piece start?

TINA PEABODY: So I start it in about the 1880s. I start with some of the first conflicts over ocean-dumping, which some of the criticisms of ocean-dumping started as early as the 1850s, but I start it in that late nineteenth century moment. The, you know, beginning cusp of the Progressive Era, when people are starting to question the dominant method the city has relied on for years, in part because the island didn't have a lot of land, the island of Manhattan, but it did have plenty of access to water. So, ocean-dumping was the most convenient of solutions in some ways. And so I start with the first sort of push-back against ocean-dumping. And it's from a lot of different fronts.

You know, on the one hand, you have communities that will eventually become part of New York City but weren't at the time, so you know, hotels on Coney Island, that area complained that the city dumped and then trash washed up on their beaches

and that it was endangering their resorts. You had similar complaints in New Jersey, you know, consistently throughout the twentieth century. And then you also had the fact that the city is sharing space on waterfront docks to do what it's doing, right.

So, when you dump the refuse, you have to use a waterfront dock to prep it, you had Italian laborers, mostly Italian laborers, who are sorting for any salvageable goods, they're trimming the scows that are going out for dumping to make sure that they can, they're even and can, you know, take to water. And so they're sharing waterfront dock space, which is very precious, as the city's economically starting to boom and the waterfront is, you know, incredibly important for that. So you have those two sort of spaces where people are competing and it's sort of threatening in some ways, the potential primacy of New York City's waterfront.

So that's where it starts, and it goes through, so you mention Giuliani, and it kind of culminates with Staten Island's attempt to secede in 1990, in part over frustrations of the Fresh Kills. And so it looks at that moment of the secession campaign, the closure of fresh kills in 1996, or the announcement that it would be closed by in 1996, by Giuliani, as sort of a culmination of, you know, a combination of business interests and middle class and upper class residents sort of trying to shape

the city's sanitation techniques in ways that would suit them.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: I remember very distinctly the Staten Island secession campaign in the city elections of 1993, which is when Giuliani was elected. It was a repeat, you know: Dinkins-Giuliani in '89 and Dinkins had kind of eked out a squeaker in '89 and then in '93 Giuliani came back and eked out a squeaker in '93. I do distinctly remember the Staten Island referendum being sort of accredited with like that victory margin, you know--the difference between '89 and '93 wasn't that great in terms of the raw vote totals, but the turnout that got instigated on Staten Island because this kind of anti-New York City backlash connects back to this issue about the landfill.

So, I, could you talk about that a little bit? I didn't know that side of it.

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, no, I think actually the word backlash I think is pretty accurate. So, it was, the first time secession came up in Staten Island, it was actually 1990, they agreed to, they voted to get to create a secession commission basically to study the issue, to create a Staten Island charter, and then in 1993 they voted to approve that charter, by I think a 65% majority, it was a lower majority than the first vote to create the charter commission and it ended up dying in the state legislature. But, at the same time, the Staten

Island is both really important in the Giuliani campaign of 1993 and it's also super super important for George Pataki at the same time. And so, you have this sort of Republican, these Republicans come to power that feel that Staten Island is important to their political futures.

And so Giuliani very quickly, you know, he brings Staten Islanders onto his transition committee- I think is what you would call it- yeah, and so he makes sure some of the big political players in Staten Island are involved. And in some ways the closure of Fresh Kills, the promise to close Fresh Kills, he announced it in 1996 I should clarify it closed actually in 2001, but his promise to do that and Pataki supporting it is sort of an acknowledgement that they were important to their political fortunes. And what you said about backlash I think is actually important to what Staten Islanders were doing.

So, in some ways, the Staten Island of this era is shaped by the fact that in 1964, you have the Verrazano Narrows bridge, and there's sort of this influx of population to Staten Island, not that it becomes way more populous, but there is a little bit of a population growth, and it's a lot of them are people coming from Brooklyn and they're trying to get away from the era I'm talking about in the podcast here. They're looking at, you know, what they see as racial chaos, crime, things like this, the problems that the city is going through, even in the 60s. And they're, you know, they're kind of

fleeing to a more suburban habitat essentially, when that opens in 1964.

So, I think that there is a sense of sort of "white flight" racial politics that come into the secession campaign, I'm not saying it's everything, but it definitely is part of it and they didn't see themselves as culturally connected to the city anymore and Fresh Kills was sort of a reminder of what they shouldn't be burdened with, if that makes sense, right. I mean Staten Island is the big exception that proves the rule. It's a middle, predominantly middle class, white area that was burdened with one of the largest landfills in the world and so I think their frustration with it just proves how much it wasn't supposed to be like that, if that makes sense.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: I think absolutely without question the intensity of feeling for Giuliani on Staten Island in that era was at least interpreted even by me at that very young age as bound up in a certain kind of white ethnicity that wasn't really comfortable with the fact that David Dinkins had been elected in 1989 and not Rudy Giuliani.

I do think the protest that I'm talking about in the 60s have a direct relationship to everything we're talking about in the 80s and 90s in the sense that I think Staten Islanders very clearly see the types of protests that are happening, that I'm describing in the talk. They see that as

threatening their potential to get their problem with Fresh Kills solved, right. You know, you see in the Staten Island Advance, you see them talk about if the Bronx or Manhattan had the problem that we had, can you imagine the protests that would emerge.

So there's this sense that civil rights activism got so vocal, including in the realm of sanitation I would argue, that they see it as distracting attention from, you know, Fresh Kills. Which, I mean, to their credit is a huge problem, but I think they see it as competing with primacy of taking care of that problem.

And they resent, especially by the 80s and 90s, that calls for environmental justice in the Bronx and Brooklyn because the closure of Fresh Kills means putting waste transfer stations in the Bronx, Brooklyn predominantly, and they see environmental justice protests against that, you know, mirroring the kinds of things I talk about in this talk as threatening the possibility that Fresh Kills will close. So I think there is a through line between what's happening there.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Do you happen to know... when the sanitation department in New York City was created?

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, so, the actual Department of Sanitation was 1930 and then the Department of

Street Cleaning preceded it. So, you know, there had been municipal collection, but the Department of Street Cleaning infamously didn't always have full control over disposal. Often, they let out a lot of private contracts for disposal. So, the point of the Department of Sanitation in 1930 was to centralize those functions, to give the City complete control over collection, disposal. It didn't mean that there were no private disposers, but that the City was ultimately responsible for it. So, commercial waste, besides commercial waste, the Department of Sanitation centralized those functions. But the short answer: 1930.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: There's Operation Clean Sweep, which is the Congress of Racial Equality campaign, which I think I want to hear a little more about that -- and also the same with this Garbage Offensive in East Harlem. Are they addressing environmental racism? Is it self-consciously both like anti-racist and environmentalist in an attempt to fuse the two agendas?

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, so I'll start with the last part. I absolutely think so, I think one of the things that I argue-- and some people may push back-- but I think the tendency is to say environmental justice, the environmental justice movement, which is committed to not just environmentalism but thinking about, you know, outside burdens on minority communities both, you know, and that can be just economically. And I see CORE, and especially, I think, you know, the Young Lords, I

see both of them speaking that language I think in the '60s. And to me it's an important, one of the reasons that looking at their Garbage Protest I think is so helpful. Other people have looked at them individually, have looked at them one or the other- but I think the advantage of looking at them together is you sort of can use them as a through line through what we sometimes think as this like division between the Civil Rights Era and then the Black Power Era, but you kind of see a through line in their commitment to community organizing, but I think also in that recognition that inherently the urban environment is... demonstrates their inequality, right.

And they recognize, some of them have to be I think sort of pushed to it, right. The Young Lords, the Young Lords don't initially themselves recognize how important garbage is, right. They kind of laugh it off initially because they, they want huge political revolution, right. Their mind is, you know, a revolution of the people, but they come to realize that it's something that people live with every day. And that environment reflects sort of the inequalities, the systemic inequalities that are happening. And it's sometimes in those- which is why I like thinking about garbage so much- it's just sometimes in those very little things, those simple mundane things, is where you see inequalities the most.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: As you're talking I'm just thinking it's this very clear way of entering into

an analysis of what choices have been made about whose conditions are more valuable, whose health is more disposable, and of course those are all embedded in policy choices and they reflect these distinctions of power.

The argument for environmental justice is being implicated in social democracy like they can't be disentangled. And is that also something that recurs? I mean, I see you nodding, but I want to get your take on that.

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, no, I absolutely agree. And I think their perspective is that these services are a right. A clean city is a right. And that's sort of the difference between, that I think is what's pretty revolutionary about what they're doing because I think in the Progressive Era you have a lot of middle class, upper class people saying, you know, advocating for immigrants in tenement neighborhoods and saying look at these horrible working conditions, right. Like Upton Sinclair, his whole point was "Look at what the working class is put through," right, and then people cared more about what was put in the sausage.

But, you know, they had middle class, upper class Progressive organizations advocating for them and saying, you know, the environment is, and all of them agreed that the environment is very important, right. If you lived in a shoddy tenement, right, you were gonna be, in their minds, prone to vice, to crime, right, you needed a good, healthy environment in order to thrive. And so, but those

are middle class and upper class people making those claims, right, for them I think.

And I think what's new is that it's in some ways repeating some of that Progressive Era rhetoric where they say, you know, you need a this home environment is important, we need to think about a person's total environment. The Young Lords ran breakfast programs for instance, things like that. The Black Panthers did as well. So they are paying attention to environment as a holistic, you know, part of health, I suppose, in the way Progressive Era people were, but then it's, you know, it's Black activists, it's Latino activists saying it, not you know, a middle class organization sort of saying it for them.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Are these groups talking to each other at all, or did they even see their agenda as being coextensive with one another in any kind of way?

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, no. As far as I know, not really. Not in this era that I'm covering in the lecture. But I think you're right that the early environmental movement, a lot of historians have talked about it as sort of being rooted in the suburbs, right. So it's people who moved out to the suburbs to get nature and then found that in some ways some of the suburbs were marring nature and they weren't getting what they, you know, expected. They're finding suds in their water because they

have well water and not city sewer systems, things like that. And I don't think at the time— and this is true both of just environmentalists at the time, but I think even people who like emerging environmental scholarship in the 70s— they don't really think initially of cities as a place that is a subject for environmental activism, right. I guess there's almost a sense that cities are, you know, they're too far gone, they're not really an environment.

And I think the biggest example of that disconnect is the— and I don't talk about it as much in the lecture as I do sort of in the larger chapter but— rat bites. The whole campaign against rat bites, especially in places like Harlem. And President Johnson is pushing for this idea of a Rat Control Bill and southern congressmen thought it was ridiculous. They, and in part because they didn't understand an urban place is an environment, right. And so the federal government would spend plenty of money to control agricultural pests, but it seemed strange to try to control rats in an urban environment, right, because you almost think, eh it's just a city.

And so I think some of the comments were like well why don't they just put out some bait? You know, they didn't really understand the scale and the problems that come specifically being in urban apartment buildings; how it, that ecology— and I'm really sort of just leaning into a historian named Dawn Biehler here who just studies pests in the

city- and, but, you know, that these cities bred, they had an ecology themselves, and it bred, you know, a kind of ecology that was ripe for roaches, for rats. Everybody wants to hear about rats and roaches on their podcast today, but. I think, yeah, I don't think there's this recognition among a lot of the mainstream environmentalists. They're thinking wilderness, they're thinking, you know, national parks, they're thinking things like that and not-

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: I mean even the concept of there being an urban ecology that can be made like sustainable and equitable and inclusive. That was pretty edgy for the time, wasn't it? I mean to be kind of integrating those perspectives that way?

TINA PEADBODY: Yeah, absolutely. In some ways I think it flowed more naturally than it perhaps seems from the early Civil Rights Movement because I think, you know... A lot of times we think of the Civil Rights Movement and we focus on things like school integration and those are all really important, but I think that all Civil Rights activists were aware that it was, you know, all the spaces of their lives were embedded with these inequalities, right. And so, I think it was very obvious to them, I think other people needed to kind of catch up.

But also, I mean they're also responding to, they're also responding to worsening conditions,

right. So, and in the same way that the Progressive Era saw large influxes of immigration that challenged the housing stock that New York City had, and that's why you end up with tenement buildings that are, you know, dilapidated and don't have air and don't have ventilation. Well, you know, it's a similar process when you have a large influx of African Americans, you have a large influx of Puerto Ricans, and the City's housing stock just isn't really prepared for it. And so they're responding both, I think, to a longer term awareness of segregation and discrimination in everyday life, but also sort of newer problems that are coming because of a period of growth in the city.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: There's garbage on fire, literally, in your talk and just in our colloquial English, there's plenty of gifs and memes out there of dumpster fires- I'm sure I've used them on plenty of occasions to convey my assessment of something that isn't going very well, right, it's a metaphor catastrophe of one kind or another- but, it's a metaphor for something else in this talk, right? I mean, it's doing--these fires are doing some degree of political work.

TINA PEABODY: Sure, yeah, I mean one of the reasons I was attracted to tracing a through line between CORE, the Young Lords, and sort of later sort of maybe I guess you could argue more sort of spontaneous rubbish burning during protests. But I think the advantage of it is that you see the way

garbage was both a problem but also a tool. A physical tool of the protest, right. If people aren't going to collect the garbage, well, we're going to dump it right where they can see it and then the advantages in a lot of these cases is then it has to get carted away, right.

You dump it on Borough Hall in Brooklyn, they're not going to leave it there. So, it's a tool in the sense that it's, it's both showing frustration—sometimes setting fire is just a way to get rid of it, right, burn it and be done with it— but also, it just attracts attention. It attracts the city to come in and I think it's the Young Lords that probably express this the best, they really explicitly see it as we do this, and the city comes running. It gets us attention that the city won't give us otherwise. And that when we do it, here comes the Department of Sanitation and they end up cleaning it up, right. So, whether it's attracting the attention of the police, the Fire Department, it's all sending this message about the city's priorities and it's saying in some ways, we need more attention and we're not getting it.

I think it's CORE that actually uses that wording that they say because we're, these areas are so crowded, we should be getting additional attention, not prejudicial treatment. And doing these things is a way of pushing it, right, because the city is literally sort of, you know, running around putting out fires, literally. And, you know, in the case of the Young Lords, they also, like, blocked traffic,

right. And so, to them, you're stopping the system in its tracks, right. It can't function literally without those things. So, that's I think what is so interesting I think about what they do is that they take a problem, and they make it in many ways a tool. And there's a way in which you could argue it's effective in many of the cases, or at least temporarily.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: What about the service providers? Because my, you know, the people who are actually picking up the garbage, let's say.

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, absolutely. So, in the longer chapter I talk a bit more about what is happening in the Department of Sanitation at the time. And there's sort of an irony where the Department of Sanitation- well, I guess there's two ironies- one is that the 50s and 60s is an era where the Department of Sanitation is putting a lot of stock in new technology and that's, you know, part of that, you talked about the 30s being the onset of this certain period, right. Between the 30s and 60s there's sort of this Robert Moses era faith in public planning and technology, and all of these things to I think fix the worst of the city's problems and I think the Department of Sanitation is similar, right. And it's investing in these things like super trucks, right, which can collapse new kinds of refuse that are just becoming much more prevalent in the waste stream. Things like big appliances, right, automobiles, just because of the rise of mass consumption especially after WWII, you

just have new types of big garbage that they're trying to deal with.

And so, in highlighting the sanitation protests it's sort of not to belittle the scale of the task and to also say that as much as I think budgets were a perennial excuse, right, for certain inequalities and service, I also think that the city never really budgeted quite enough to get the cleanliness that they proclaimed to want, right. You know, it's, I think waste management is one of those perpetual things where we want it to be perfect and we don't want it to mess up, but we also don't necessarily want to put a lot of money into it. And so, they are investing though a lot of money into this new upgraded equipment and things like that to try to make collection more efficient.

I will also say that the Department of Sanitation, your sort of sense that at the time it was dominated by predominantly White, some sort of White ethnic groups, and there is that irony that, you know, immigrants in the late 19th century and early 20th century, they flocked to work in the waste trade. So, you know, Italian laborers salvaging recyclables from New York's waste. Jewish immigrants were also prominent in the scrap trades. Karl Zimring does a really great history of the scrap trade called *Cash for Your Trash*. And so, they're really fundamental to a lot of those industries, but the irony for African American and Puerto Ricans, when they sort of flood into the

city in the 50s and 60s is that that's not so much the case anymore.

You have a Department of Sanitation that you'll see a lot of Irish, Italian, you know, Department of Sanitation workers and associations but you don't see a lot of African American or Puerto Rican representation in it. And it's something that the Young Lords themselves sort of recognized. So, one of the demands that I talk about for the Garbage Offensive was more jobs for African American and Puerto Ricans. So they sort of recognized that that path to sort of civil service work, that I think, or, you know, just lucrative work in the waste trade, I think they recognize that that has passed. And that was something that used to be a path into sort of, you know, a middle-class life. And so, that's an irony for some of the people who are in Staten Island and wanting to secede is that a lot of them are these descendants of groups who had once done these trades in some ways.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: We are almost out of time, but before we finish, I wonder -- just a little bit about your story, you know, how you came to this work and what brought you to it?

TINA PEABODY: During college, I worked at a living history museum, and I never really thought history was that interesting when I was say in high school, or anything, partly because people I think just taught it as sort of dates and it was always, you

know, it was presidents and it was big wars and it was all the big, big stuff. And working at a living history museum, I realized I was like "Oh no, history is really, you know, it's just about people like me." You know, it can be about how people made their bread and that's like a fascinating story, you know, trying to figure out how to use a hearth fireplace to make a loaf of bread and sort of having respect for, you know, an everyday thing that people did.

And I think, I came into a history program at the University of Albany SUNY wanting to do something that was, you know, a history that normal people would recognize, right, that's something that they cared about. But I didn't really expect to do waste management. I was, you know, I was interested in New York City, I was interested in urban spaces. I thought I would end up doing something about parks and I thought, you know, I thought conflicts over park space and how they reveal social hierarchies, racial hierarchies, because, you know, sometimes you have legal equality but these social spaces in cities will really reveal who's allowed, who's not allowed, you know, there's a lot of these unwritten rules.

And because I'm really interested in Latin America, I thought I would write about Puerto Rican immigrants and then I stumbled upon the Young Lords and lo and behold they have this garbage protest and I found myself thinking well, why? Like why was that such a big deal? And the more I learned about

the earlier history, the more I learned that they were just part of, you know, a long trend of these sort of social and racial hierarchies that were revealed just through something that everyday people experience, which is just, is the trash getting collected.

And so, I think I've come to see it as something that's useful because there's nobody that doesn't care about garbage. I mean, we're prone to maybe just not know where it goes and just expect it to work, but everyone cares, right, about whether the trash gets collected. So, that's I think what really appeals to me most about it, is that someone, you know, who isn't a historian can still recognize why it matters.

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: You've taught me a lot today. So, and hopefully all our listeners too. Thank you so much for participating, this was really wonderful. And I know, I know, you know, I mean, I assume you're planning to turn that dissertation into a book at some point, I'll be looking for that.

TINA PEABODY: Yeah, fingers crossed if I can every finish it!

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: Yeah, right. Thank you, Tina Peabody everyone.

TINA PEABODY: Thank you so much!

Conclusion

CHRISTOPHER BRICK: And that's a wrap. Please join us again next time when Dr. Alicia Gutierrez-Romine visits the pod to lecture on the history of abortion decriminalization in California. It's sensational work that Alicia's doing and we're so privileged really to be able to share it with the *Intervals* audience. We'll catch you then.