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*Have a Nice Day: The City as Joke*

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This essay explores critical responses to developments in the late-capitalist city, and how those critiques are circumscribed by the very ideology they oppose. I focus on three books that reviewers have identified as among the most provocative recent writing about New York City: Lynne Tillman's No Lease on Life (1998); Mitchell Duneier's Sidewalk (1999), and Samuel Delany's Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999).

Each of these texts develops a utopian vision of the city and each identifies capitalism as the greatest obstacle to that vision; yet in gesturing towards a better city, each ultimately reproduces capitalist ideology. Given the untrammelled course capitalism has taken in the last decades, and given that cities are expressions and engines of capitalism, writers must analyze capitalism's effects in order to understand what cities are. My interest in this paper is in how writers simultaneously fail to analyze capitalism by allowing it to delimit their ideas about what cities could be. As sites that bring large numbers of very different people into relatively close proximity, cities could, more plausibly than suburbs or rural areas, occasion radical social experiments. Cities could encourage the formation of alliances across class and other social divisions that in turn could challenge the very bases for distributing resources and power.

Despite their similar subject matter, the differences among Tillman's, Delany's and Duneier's books are more obvious than their similarities. No Lease on Life is an experimental postmodern novel, written in the third person but focused almost entirely on a single character, and published in 1998 by Harcourt Brace & Company. No Lease on Life examines twenty hours in the life of a middle-aged white woman, Elizabeth Hall, who works part-time as a proofreader for a business magazine and lives in a rent-stabilized apartment in Manhattan's Lower East Side, near Tompkins Square Park. The novel begins with a joke and is punctuated throughout by jokes about ethnicity, race, religion, and sex. Each of the writers I discuss criticizes the contemporary city, and each critique presumes an idea of what a better city could be. Tillman wants a city to provide privacy and quiet; Delany wants a city to allow people to have safe, casual public sex; and Duneier wants urban space to become an agora in which people can exchange goods and opinions. As we will see, each author justifies his or her modest proposals by resorting to aspects of capitalist ideology: the entrepreneurial spirit, the bourgeois notions of civility and privacy, the belief that human relations reduce to commercial ones. Even progressive authors find it impossible to sustain a vision of alternatives to capitalism. This impossibility could be troped as tragedy, in which one necessarily cannot transcend one's historical moment, or as irony, in which those who set out to criticize capitalism end up adopting its premises. The city as joke incarnates the irony that results when diagnosis and cure become symptoms, problems are posed as solutions, and critique implodes into echo.


on city life but only to outline the problems that result when urban planners fail to attend to city dwellers’ actual practices. Jacobs does not argue that capitalism’s processes of accumulation and its drive for profit influence the urban planning practices of which she disapproves. Far from it; the urban qualities she defends — stability, diversity, safety, social control and order — are in no significant conflict with capitalism. Indeed, her language suggests that rather than destroy those qualities, capitalism could even promote them, since economic metaphors drawn from capitalism govern her polemic. Privacy is “precious” in cities, Jacobs writes: “Window privacy is the easiest commodity in the world to get” but “the privacy of having reasonable control over who shall make inroads on your time and when, [is a] rare commodity[.] in most of this world”. Here is Jacobs’s summary of her argument: “A city’s collection of opportunities of all kinds, and the fluidity with which these opportunities and choices can be used, is an asset — not a detriment — for encouraging neighborhood stability. However, this asset has to be capitalized upon”. Commodities, opportunities, fluidity, assets, capitalization: the message is that of capitalism, whose need for flexibility must be depicted not as wreaking havoc and crisis but as creating stability, a stability that results from what Jacobs unabashedly calls “webs of public surveillance”.

Tillman, Duneier, and Delany differ from Jacobs because each intentionally adopts a range of critical positions against capitalism. Tillman has said that her books are “about limits, and about fighting those limits.” She includes capitalism as one of the limits against which she struggles, commenting in an interview that her depiction of landlord-tenant relationships in *No Lease on Life* “could stand in for any good capitalist critique.” Her novel includes caustic commentary on the protagonist’s employer, the publisher of a business magazine, and on the difference between rich, middle-class, and poor in New York City with respect to the police, the justice system, prisons and social services. Duneier flatly describes US society as one “with high levels of economic inequality, racism, illiteracy, and drug dependency, and with inadequate transitions from mental hospitals and prisons to work and home”. He celebrates the public character’s distance from the cash nexus: the public character takes responsibility for strangers, and, Duneier glosses, “[t]he essence of this responsibility is that you do it without being hired”. Delany devotes extensive space to demonstrating in detail that the plans to redevelop Times Square aim not at improving the neighborhood, as the plans’ proponents claim, but at speculation, the “truth of high finance... a truth [that] makes capitalism” — its drive to make profits with regard for nothing else.

Given their clearly critical views of capitalism, it is telling that in writing about public space, privacy, and urban civility, all three authors retreat from that critique by reproducing capitalist ideology. One symptom of that reproduction is their use of Jacobs’s work; other symptoms, we will see, surface in their discussions of public space, privacy, civility and the social contract. And one way to understand why capitalism is so inescapable a framework for them is to examine more closely the history they have in common, their shared immersion in late-capitalist New York City. In *The Informational City*, Manuel Castells shows that the restructuring of capitalism in the last three decades reorganizes modes of production in order to maintain unchanged capitalism’s goals: the maximization of profit and the accumulation of capital. Castells identifies a new informational mode of development in which knowledge, not energy or labor, becomes the source of productivity. The informational mode of development focuses on information processing, increases the flexibility of production processes, and places new value on processes of acculturation that produce information and the skills needed


to process it. Castells is unremittingly critical of the new informational mode of development: "[I]ts developmental logic polarizes society, segments social groups, isolates cultures, and segregates the uses of a shared space". The informational mode of development has intensified social inequity and polarization by shifting political power away from a welfare state that redistributed wealth to a "warfare" state devoted to transferring power from labor to capital, a project supervised by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Capital now appropriates a higher share of surplus from production, in large part through the loss of jobs in light industry and manufacturing and through a dramatic expansion of the informal economy and the service sector, both of which employ large numbers of non-unionized women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. As Castells shows, the bulk of new job growth from 1982 to 1995 occurred in "low-skilled occupations in the service sector: ...building custodians...cashiers...secretaries" restaurant workers and sales clerks.

How has the restructuring of capitalism affected a city like New York? New York City is a global center for finance, banking, real estate services and media that has seen a corresponding increase in the consumption of services related to food, cleaning and entertainment. As such, it has been particularly subject to the kinds of polarization summed up by the term "dual city." As more middle-class and affluent people have moved to the city in the past twenty years in order to live near their jobs in financial and media services, the low-wage informal economy has exploded. Cities house, more or less side-by-side, skilled workers in the informational economy who utilize many private services, and large numbers of people earning low wages whose children receive poorly funded public educations that fail to train them for jobs in the informational economy.

As Neil Smith has shown, the global city of informational capitalism, which is also the dual city, leads to the spatial process called gentrification that has transformed New York City neighborhoods including Soho, the Lower East Side, and Times Square. Gentrification begins with disinvestment in a neighborhood, which creates a gap between actual rent and potential rent. That rent gap in turn encourages property speculation, particularly in areas that are close to thriving business centers. By driving up rents and property values, gentrification drives out poorer residents and replaces them with wealthier ones. Gentrification also tends to drive out bohemians, beatniks, hippies, and artists who often have middle-class upbringings and options but who like an urban milieu, need to pay low rents, and choose to live with poor people. With gentrification also comes the reorientation of a neighborhood towards the consumption of expensive goods and services geared towards wealthier residents.

As capitalism in the US has shifted from producing goods to producing services, so has urban space and urban life. Gentrification alters the city to suit the informational mode of production and in so doing promotes "new, profitable forms of consumption" thus intensifying the capitalization and commodification of everyday life. The reproduction of middle-class labor power depends on the middle-class consumption of cooking, cleaning and childcare services provided by immigrants and ethnic minorities. Because consumption, and particularly consumption of services, is so central to the informational mode of development, to the dual city, and to gentrified neighborhoods, urban relations increasingly inhere in acts of buying and selling. As the city becomes more saturated with expensive stores and leisure and entertainment sites, an ever smaller number of the city's residents can afford to participate in what has become the basis of urban social life. As Samuel Delany points out, the old Times Square was for the working classes; the new, gentrified Times Square is a middle-class entertainment area to which the working classes are welcome "if they can pay and are willing to blend in". Gentrification intensifies the commodification of shel-


ter and urban space. In his study of the Lower East Side, Christopher Mele shows that beginning in the late 1970s, "speculative investment was fueled not by known need or demand for affordable, low-income housing units but by anticipated consumption of apartments and condominiums by 'upscale urbanites'". For those upscale urbanites, Mele argues, the Lower East Side's history as a poor neighborhood that housed Puerto Ricans, queers, and artists became simply one more image to be consumed, a way to create distinctive patterns of consumption within the middle class.

The ironies of gentrification have been frequently rehearsed: dissident members of the middle class begin to move into a poor neighborhood and thus prime it for transformation into exactly the kind of middle-class neighborhood they sought to avoid, in a process that ultimately displaces both the dissident middle-class and many poor residents. While some have sought to distinguish between bohemians who embrace their poor neighbors and gentrifiers who deliberately seek to displace them, such a distinction assigns a wishful agency to individual actors that belies the larger forces driving gentrification. The joke of gentrification is the joke of failed critique, whose punch line is that those who seek to defy or bypass capitalism end up, often inadvertently, executing its business.

Of the three urban texts under discussion, Lynne Tillman's *No Lease on Life* most self-consciously presents gentrification as a joke about the double bind in which capitalist subjects find themselves. The text itself is littered with jokes, and Tillman adopts an unstable, ambiguous stance that always uneasily threatens to turn her protagonist into a joke about a social type — the downwardly mobile gentrifier in spite of herself. Elizabeth has the skills to secure herself a niche in the informational economy, working at a business magazine with proofreaders who, the narrator explains, are "white, college graduates, mostly middle-class misfits who accepted inferior jobs and were not ambitious". Is Elizabeth a heroine of modern urban life or an agent of urban polarization? As one reviewer puts it, Tillman's attitude towards Elizabeth "remains a mystery." Another notes that the novel depicts a "life in which heroic action achieves the same result as treading water." A self-canceling structure governs the novel's exploration of what happens when middle-class expectations encounter the working-class conditions of urban life in the dual city. Elizabeth uses her skills at processing information to battle an unfair rent increase; she also rages against the neighborhood's lack of quiet and cleanliness. The very signs of Elizabeth's civic indignation — at the superintendent who will not clean the building, although he is "supposed" to, or the post office worker who "was supposed to speed service. She was hindering it" — are also the signs of a middle-class entitlement which her less privileged neighbors remark upon: "She'd grown up in a house in the suburbs. She'd never accept the fact that sometimes landlords don't fix buildings with tenants living in them". The novel's irony and neutrality, accentuated by its deracinated reproduction of jokes never attributed clearly to any speaker, intertwines resistance and recapitulation. It is thus impossible to decide whether Elizabeth has a problem with gentrification or is herself the problem of gentrification.

Elizabeth's rants against her poor neighborhood's quality of life expose some of gentrification's harm, but her tirades also glorify a gentrified city that depends on the consumption of services. Tillman's protagonist, we are told several times, doesn't cook, so she and her boyfriend always eat take-out food. She hates the country because of its lack of services, its "one-movie towns, without bookstores or restaurants". Over the course of her day, the majority of her interactions with strangers involve purchasing services: she buys take-out food, a beer in a bar, picks up dry-cleaning, buys groceries, takes a cab. Elizabeth thinks obsessively about life in her

building and her neighborhood, and in the course of her
day engages in actions and conversations whose intensity
— of interest, hatred, empathy — exceed any rational cal-
culus. At the same time, however, she lives in a city satu-
rated by the consumption of services, and her mode of
consuming them, even when buying from shopkeepers
she has seen for years, is limited to the kinds of distanced
politeness exemplified in the ubiquitous formula "Have
a nice day."

As urban chroniclers and polemicists, Tillman, Delany
and Duneier are all interested in public and private
space. Each writer is fascinated by urban interactions that
cannot be easily explained as direct effects of economic
causes, and each therefore represents relationships that
defy urban polarization and thus challenge capitalism’s
creation of a dual city. Yet Delany and Tillman, follow-
ing Jane Jacobs, also argue for the importance of main-
taining separateness from strangers by drawing clear lines
between public and private space. In The Death and Life of
Great American Cities, Jacobs calls privacy one of the most
precious attributes of city life. Good urban public space
allows contact between strangers and neighbors without
compromising their privacy. Delany takes up Jacobs’s
belief that contact can only thrive when a level of privacy
can be strictly maintained. His description of a series of
contacts he has while out for a walk in his neighborhood
thus ends when he unlocks the door to his apartment
building and enters the lobby, where neither the reader
nor his neighbors follow him. His ability to have contacts
depends on secure access to a space in which he can be
free of them — on access to a space which neither he (as
narrator) nor his readers enter.

Given the strong historical association between public-
private divisions and capitalist ideology, it is not
surprising that Delany repeatedly justifies public sexual
contact against those who would eliminate it by showing
that it has economic value. Contact promotes sexual
"opportunity" and reduces sexual "scarcity." Contact
across classes is important because it produces greater
"material rewards" with greater efficiency than does
networking within a class. Contact can take place in cities
because cities are markets that concentrate "specific needs
and suppliers".

Delany wants to make sure that urban supplies include
pleasure in the goods they offer, but in so doing he risks
containing pleasure within a capitalist calculus rather
than using pleasure as a lever to shift the hold capitalism
has on urban relations. His final sentence invokes what
Delany himself qualifies as the "truly outrageous
metaphor of "social capital... While networking may
produce the small, steady income, contact both main-
tains the social field of ‘the pleasant’ and provides as well
the high-interest returns that make cosmopolitan life
wonder-filled and rich". "Outrageous" can be taken
many ways: as parody, as camp, or as an admission that
his metaphor of social capital turns contact’s political
and social challenges to capitalism into the ideological
notion of economic risk that is capitalism’s ideological
cornerstone. Using metaphors that conflate social and
economic gains leads Delany to defend the radical pro-
ject of contact by saying it promotes social quietism. In
seeking to persuade an audience that his rhetoric con-
structs as skeptical of all but free-market values, Delany
repeatedly defends contact not because it can lead to
structural social change but because it "stabilizes" —
without, Delany specifies, actually changing — the rela-
tionship between classes otherwise at war.

Where Delany constructs the existence of an impermea-
ble private sphere that allows for public contact without
fear, Tillman points to the erosion of any boundary
between public and private, an erosion that stems from
disinvestment in poor neighborhoods. Tillman’s narra-
tor responds to the collapse of the boundary between
private and public by imagining that privacy can be
secured only if public space becomes more private. The
narrator vividly describes the annoyance and rage that result when a space that is supposed to be private — Elizabeth’s individual apartment unit — is invaded by noise from the street, to which anyone has access at any time. Elizabeth thus also decries the lack of privacy available in the street itself, as well as in the more public parts of her building. Garbage that should be hidden gets strewn on the street or sold on the block. Her building has no lock on the front door, so that people from the street come inside to do drugs, have sex, eat, sleep, and shit. She finds human shit in the vestibule. In the evening, she finds a drunk man in her hallway whom she imagines listening at the door to the basketball game she watches, a fantasy that literalizes the way in which television mingles the private with the public. Elizabeth spends much of her time at the window, a border whose permeability and openness she deems "pathetic" at the novel’s outset. "Car alarms went off. No one could sleep. Windows opened wide. People hung out their windows. Their mouths hung open too. It was pathetic". When Elizabeth imagines herself addressing "the block" from her fire escape, the subject of her public speech is "the need for quiet"; when her inner monologue becomes more of a rant, she tells those who publicly expose what should be private "keep your shit to yourself". Shit, that most private of substances, must be policed out of the public sphere. Elizabeth notes that "After the cops attack on the [Tompkins Square Park] squatters...the sandbox was free of dog and human shit. No one argued about that". One would be hard pressed to defend shitting in public, and that is precisely the problem with Tillman’s depiction of urban decay. Its terms are so compelling ("no one argued about that") that we forget that the solution to the problem they sketch is based on compulsion. Elizabeth recalls trenchantly and with some envious longing how "She once saw a woman shitting in a phone booth on Wall Street. The cops were there in a second". Those who can afford to shit in private do not want to have to endure the discomfort imposed by the sight of others shitting in public — a sight that they interpret as an invasion of the viewer’s privacy. When privacy remains the supreme social desire but private space cannot be clearly demarcated, public space must be policed to secure privacy everywhere.

That the ability to shit in private has become a commodity many in New York City cannot afford is vividly illustrated in Duneier’s Sidewalk. Duneier, intent on changing the view of sidewalk sellers as a public nuisance, seeks to explain why they engage in behavior that many perceive as deviant — for example, pissing and shitting in public. Duneier takes some time to document the unusable state of the nearest public toilets, located in Washington Square Park, where there are no stalls, the toilets have no seats, and there is shit on the rims of the toilet basins. Duneier also notes that many of the men are afraid to go as far as the park to use the bathroom because the police rapidly dispose of vendors’ wares when they leave their tables unattended for even short periods of time. Several of the sidewalk sellers are even denied access to bathrooms in fast food restaurants on the block where they regularly make purchases, because they do not fit the store’s idea of who a customer is.

Duneier’s analysis puts Tillman’s and Delany’s in critical perspective. Delany’s zeal for keeping public space fluid depends on knowing that private space can remain private. Tillman’s heroine is irritated by the permeability of private and public spheres and seeks to secure privacy within by enforcing it without. If, with the help of the police, she can make her immediate public surroundings more quiet, clean and decorous, her private space will be less subject to unwanted intrusions and exposures. Duneier, by contrast, shows that when the line between public and private becomes blurred, public space becomes a set of private services that must be purchased, and can be purchased only by those who appear able to afford the price of admission.
The resurgence of "civility" "social contract," and "social control" as positive terms is one of the more surprising tendencies in recent writing about cities. A century ago, the problem of loss of civility in the city was linked to imperialist and racist notions of degeneration, which viewed the city as a barbaric, primitive jungle that departed from and attacked white middle-class norms. Now many writers deploy the notion of civility to argue that the white middle class itself no longer adheres to the norms of civilization. In _The Culture of Cities_, Sharon Zukin writes of the loss of "civility" that results when the "fragmentation of public life" produces fear of violation by contact with others. In a study of gentrification in San Francisco, Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzenberg note that city residents who share public space should form a community governed by the unwritten rules of "social contracts" yet "the civility of the city is rapidly crumbling" because of an influx of middle-class residents who do not understand those rules. Although the term "social contract" has a very specific history as a term in political theory, writers like Solnit and Schwartzenberg use it to refer loosely to the mutual obligations of those who live in, visit, and govern cities.

Is the notion of a social contract, a term that resonates with economic exchange and state power, compatible with civility, which in theory (rarely in practice) refers to codes of behavior adhered to between equals? The evidence of recent urban history suggests that capitalism and state power rend rather than mend social bonds. Manuel Castells has shown that capitalism and the warfare state have destroyed what he too calls the social contract, by which he means the redistribution of power effected by the "welfare state". In New York City, Mayors Koch and Giuliani deliberately demolished the welfare state and expanded the police state in order to open the city to an informational economy. That economy, Castells writes, contributes "to the dissolution of the social fabric that for decades protected wage-earners from the unrestrained imposition of the logic of capital". For Neil Smith "the language of civic morality" is similarly a ruse for shifting power away from the poor.

Capitalism and state militarism destroy the equalizing social bonds created by the welfare state's redistribution of power, and their ideologies therefore do not offer an effective framework for thinking about cities as sites of collective resistance to the urban process of creating hierarchies of power that serve a capitalist economy. Samuel Delany recognizes this when he introduces the notions of pleasure and comfort into the idea of the social communities created by cities. Against those who want to regulate pleasure, which they deem inimical to the social contract, Delany argues that desire is never outside social constraint and indeed that all social constraints engender desire. As a result, not only would it be useless to eliminate pleasure from the city in the name of social safety, pleasure itself produces communities whose members can maintain order among themselves. At the same time, Delany has difficulty justifying the social without talking about the economic. He deems porn theaters that encourage sex among audience members worthy of support because they "provide" a "social function" and are "institutions" that make a "service" available. "Service" is an ambiguous term that straddles both the social and the economic realms, as do many of Delany's terms, and its ambiguity masks the conflict between social bonds and capitalist "institutions". As Delany himself points out, capitalist institutions are created and destroyed by greed, and as a result they are indifferent to both the social good and the social ills they produce. If capitalism is indifferent to the social, then how useful can it be for the social to defend itself by recourse to the capitalist belief that happiness and community can be bought and sold?

For Lynne Tillman, the key drive at play in city life is not pleasure, which can be satisfied, but need and want, which can never be sated: "No one obliterates the rage and empty craziness that ignites want.... People never

really had what they wanted, because they wanted everything”. As a result, _No Lease on Life_ takes a deeply ironic view of the social contract, in which defenses of urban civility ultimately reinforce the violence and unequal distribution of power that they protest. The novel’s recurring jokes are an emblem of this irony. Tillman’s thinking about jokes recalls Freud, one of her touchstones, for whom the joke is eminently social and public. Jokes are only jokes by virtue of being told to a listener, and thus help to make a public; as Freud put it, “every joke calls for a public of its own”. Jokes are also in the public domain, since they circulate anonymously and are not the property of any author. As Tillman put it in an interview, the jokes in her novel “aren’t told by anyone; they’re just part of the fabric of the city.”15 Freud also uses economic terms when he describes jokes as generating profit; the teller gives the hearer a joke, and the hearer profits because he “has bought the pleasure of the joke with very small expenditure on his own part…. [H]is pleasure corresponds to this economy”. But jokes in general, and Tillman’s jokes in particular, are also about hostility, invective, division, aggression, and exclusion; the majority of Tillman’s jokes revolve around the racial, sexual, religious and class differences that fissure New York City. If jokes are “part of the fabric of the city” then woven into that image of unity are attacks of and attacks on difference.

If we turn to the novel’s plot, we find an equally ambiguous treatment of the notion of the social contract. Elizabeth Hall is angry because her landlord, the building’s super, some of her neighbors, and strangers to the block frequently break the rules of what she considers to be a social contract guaranteeing cleanliness and quiet. The novel repeatedly presents Elizabeth’s fantasized solution to this dissolution of the social contract as murder. “Elizabeth liked the role, vigilante, citizen executioner”; within a page of the novel’s opening, the narrator writes, “Elizabeth wanted to kill them”, and then materializes that usually empty figure of speech in anxious detail over the course of several pages. Elizabeth imagines how she would carry out the murder, what she would say to the police who would arrest her, how she would address the judge at her trial, and fantasizes comically that prison life would realize her dream of privacy: “Maybe she’d be able to read in jail. She wondered if it was quiet in there”.

For Elizabeth, murder is the social contract. On the one hand, murder is a way to impose the social contract on others by appropriating the power of the institutions that enforce it. As a murderer, Elizabeth thus imagines herself replacing the police, who never come when she calls, by imposing social order through killing. She imagines speaking after murdering one of the men who throws garbage cans at cars on the street: “She’d say her response was about…dignity and a social space, a civil space, actually a civilian space…. Elizabeth might not do time for doing a moron. She had more justification. Her action [would be] a social attack”. On the other hand, Elizabeth’s murderous fantasies are also about her subjection to the social contract as a result of having institutions impose their power on her: “she’d murder the guy…. The cops would be called. She’d be taken away”; she’d say “Judge, your honor”. Later, eating lunch in the same restaurant as a policeman, Elizabeth muses, “There was nothing much….between her need for authority and his need to be an authority”. To imagine that murder can enforce the social contract is to imagine violence as that contract’s basis; since violence is unequally concentrated in the police and the state, Elizabeth’s fantasy shows that civility, far from creating harmony, is fundamentally divisive.

Mitchell Duneier conceptualizes the social contract and civility not as police power but as “social control” and “social norms.” In order to show that behavior that seems deviant actually follows a norm, he demonstrates that it involves a level of social control exerted both on others and on the self. If, as so many readers of _Sidewalk_ attest, the


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book works to humanize its subjects, it does so by demonstrating that they want to adhere to social norms and controls, to be part of the social fabric. This imposition of a universal desire to conform becomes even more problematic when Duneier repeatedly presents property, economic exchange, and money as the social fabric's warp and woof. At times, Duneier criticizes how not only racism and a discomfort with difference but also capitalism delimit what constitutes a social bond. As an example of the attitudes he seeks to refute, Duneier cites the legal counsel of a downtown business improvement district explaining why sidewalk vendors should be removed: "They are not selling high-quality goods... It's not clear that they are part of the social fabric". Duneier's response throughout the book, however, does not depart significantly from the assumption that to be part of the social fabric, one must first and foremost sell goods, earn money, and respect property. He disagrees with the lawyer he cites only about how much the goods should cost, how much money needs to be earned, and the property status of recycled magazines. This fundamental adherence to capitalist ideology leads him to describe any kind of social interaction in economic terms. Seeking to explain why middle-class residents of the Village don't respond to the sidewalk vendors with the trust usually accorded to public characters, he analyzes conversations that some of the men have with women passing by to explain why the women would consider them harassment. In those conversations, the men deliberately ignore conversational cues they acknowledge in other interactions. Duneier translates this lapse of community into economic terms when he calls it "interactional vandalism", a metaphor that once again turns contact, conversation and civility into an economic transaction governed by the laws of property.

The tension around capitalism is present throughout Duneier's book and becomes quite pointed in his concluding paragraphs:

Any society with high levels of economic inequality, racism, illiteracy, and drug dependency, and with inadequate transitions from mental hospitals and prisons to work and home, will have vast numbers of people who cannot conform to the requirements of its formal institutions. Given this, the correct response is not for society to attempt to rid public spaces of the outcasts it has had a hand in producing. It is vital to the well-being of cities with extreme poverty that there be opportunities for those on the edge to engage in self-directed entrepreneurial activity. There will always be people who, faced with dispiriting social conditions, give up. The people we see working on Sixth Avenue are persevering. They are trying not to give up hope. We should honor that in them.

These are stirring words, but the transition that Duneier seamlessly makes from "high levels of economic inequality, racism, illiteracy and drug dependency" to "self-directed entrepreneurial activity" moves from defending sidewalk vending as a valid form of work to presenting it as a solution to structural social problems. But sidewalk vending cannot possibly be adequate to solve the problems of "high levels of economic inequality, racism, illiteracy and drug dependency". Many people lack entrepreneurial spirit, and those who have it will never cure the social ills Duneier diagnoses, not least because there is a basic contradiction between social community and economic exchange. As Duneier himself shows, entrepreneurship is an essentially conflictual activity in which the seller and the buyer work to "get over" on each other. As a zero-sum game, then, entrepreneurial buying and selling are poor bases for producing civility and equality, even if customers and sellers do automatically tell each other to "have a nice day" at the close of every transaction. Self-directed entrepreneurial activity may give people working on Sixth Avenue very real and important hope, but there will be little hope for city life today if we limit our utopian visions to the horizons set by capitalism.

In 1994, only a few months after the day on which No Lease

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on Life takes place, the artist Sophie Calle asked the writer Paul Auster to provide her with a set of instructions for living in New York, which she promised to carry out to the letter. Her instructions were to smile at and talk to strangers; to give away sandwiches and cigarettes to homeless people; and to adopt a public space and beautify it as though it were her own. Calle published an account of the piece entitled "Gotham Handbook". In it she describes decorating a public telephone booth with flowers, postcards, a mirror, and outfitting it with pen, paper, food, and drink. Passersby frequently remarked either that the phone booth must have been vandalized or that it must be a memorial to someone dead. Others wrote comments in a book Calle left in the booth describing the decoration as an act of generosity. After a week, a local neighborhood politician asked Calle for a permit and within a day, AT&T removed the decorations.

Calle recounts her lack of pleasure in carrying out her instructions, a displeasure she formalizes by keeping accounts of her tasks: after a week, what she calls the "total balance of the operation" adds up to 125 smiles given for 72 smiles received; 22 sandwiches accepted for 10 refused; 8 packets of cigarettes accepted for 0 refused, and 154 minutes of conversation. Calle’s ledger is a joke on herself and on the limits of utopia. The ledger tabulates acts that should go uncounted, sets a value on what should be invaluable, turns into credits or debits acts that should bypass calculated exchanges.

Calle does not seek to intervene directly in a political climate that has moved so far to the right that even progressive and radical arguments feel the need to adopt capitalist values in order to be persuasive. As a result, she has the freedom to joke easily not only about the limits of generosity but also about the limits of the community created by capitalism. As part of her beautification of the phone booth, she describes how she "recovers the insignia NINEX – the name of the New York phone company – with a poster, black letters on green, that has the words HAVE A NICE DAY ... the inevitable American expression that punctuates every exchange". Replacing one dollar sign (NINEX) with another (HAVE A NICE DAY, printed in the color scheme of the dollar bill) is a joke on what happens when the city is conceived only in terms of capital. Like all jokes, it contains an element of aggression, an aggression that helps to lift a prohibition or overcome an inhibition or difficulty. In this case, the joke simultaneously enacts and lifts a prohibition that seems to have become so ubiquitous it has become invisible: the prohibition on imagining a world outside capitalism, even if only in jest.