The Good Old Days Of Poverty: Merchants and the Battle Over Pushcart Peddling on the Lower East Side

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In the late 1920's, New York City's Lower East Side merchants, local reformers and city officials as well as private developers and city planners endorsed plans for a host of physical changes that they hoped would usher in what they called the "East Side of Tomorrow." They planned to abolish pushcarts, raze tenements, widen streets, build housing for the middle class and wealthy, and create the East River Drive. The community condoned many of these changes, but along with physical changes came an effort to reform the behavior of Jewish and Italian East Siders. These changes attempted to "de-ethnicize" the Lower East Side. The various battles that emerged over proposed and implemented changes engendered responses of fear, anger, nostalgia and altruism. Contested issues contributed greatly to shaping an emerging sentimental myth about the East Side and the "good old days of poverty" and set the stage for the Lower East Side to become a site of Jewish cultural pilgrimage.

One flash point of contention was the campaign to abolish pushcarts and replace them with clean and sanitized indoor retail markets. Peddling proliferated because it provided work for East Siders as well as a cheap, familiar and efficient place for residents to shop. Peddling was work that East Siders depended on during hard times.[1] In 1930, 47,000 family members depended on earnings made at pushcarts; the pushcart business generated $40-50 million dollars yearly. In addition, more than 50 percent of all pushcarts in the city were still to be found on the Lower East Side.[2]

Local Lower East Side merchants viewed the carts, not as a traditional means of subsistence, but as a public nuisance as well as a source of personal embarrassment. They envisioned a different Lower East Side, one without the

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[1] Interview on Lower East Side conducted December 2, 1932, Box 5, Papers of the Graduate School of Jewish Social Work (GSJSW), American Jewish Historical Society, Brandeis University.

[2] *East Side Chamber News* (ESCN), March 1930, p. 7-8. Mary Simkovitch of Greenwich House Settlement was one of the few reformers who realized that covered markets were "expensive and unnecessary and (will not) tend to cheapen the price of food." She spoke out against the indoor markets as well as the licensing of peddlers as early as 1914. See her letter to Lillian Wald, April 29, 1914, Box 30, Wald Collection.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume Twenty-seven, no. 2, Winter 1998.
 ISSN 0894-6825.

blatant stamp of ethnicity which the pushcarts represented. In 1929, local merchants associated with the Chamber of Commerce initiated a campaign to wipe out the East Side's open-air markets. Their newspaper, the *East Side Chamber News,* stated as one of its primary goals the "establishment of central public market buildings and the abolition of all curb pushcarts."[3]

These merchants, saw themselves not as businessmen trying to wipe out the competition, but rather as self-appointed reformers. Their anti-pushcart campaign was not, they claimed, "the selfish effort of property owners to increase the value of their holdings, but the altruistic endeavor of public-spirited citizens to do away with a civic menace and disgrace."[4]

But these merchants were not simply interested in cleaner streets and less competition. They also wanted to reform the working patterns of East Siders and the behavior that accompanied it. They were offended by what they saw as the vestigial character of immigrant behaviors. Joseph Platzker, editor of the *ESCN,* was most upset by the peddlers "old world method" of conducting business. He wrote:

> Contrary to accepted opinions, the leading merchants in this section do not look with the same favor at the open-air markets as they did a generation ago. They feel that this old world method of selling cheap merchandise or foodstuffs should not survive in its present form.[5]

Central to the reform of the Lower East Side, the merchants believed, was erasing ethnicity, or failing that at least sanitize and tame it. Merchants knew that visitors came to view the "colorful" East Side markets, but, they hoped to replace local "color with conventional prosperity."[6]

The pushcart stood for immigrant with a capital 'I,' old-world, ethnic.[7] Members of the Chamber of Commerce like Platzker, wanted outsiders to cease looking at the East Side as an immigrant community. The goal of these businessmen, wrote one author, should be "to convert [sic] the East Side of alien congestion into an American community."[8]

Yet, they simultaneously recognized that nostalgia for the recent immigrant past had an increasing appeal for customers. Ex-Lower East Siders,

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[3] See *ESCN,* June 1929.

[4] Harry Morton Goldberg, "What Will Become of the Curb Pushcarts?" p. 9. The Regional Plan Association [1931, Appendix B] also endorsed the removal of the pushcarts. Their endorsement was based on recommendations of the East Side Chamber of Commerce with whom they worked. In 1931, the RPA issued a bulletin specifically on the Lower East Side.

[5] Joseph Platzker, "Chamber Studies Open Air Markets in American Cities," *ESCN,* February 1929, p. 7.

[6] "Book Reviews," *New York Telegram,* February 21, 1930. Quoted in *ESCN,* March 1930. There is no microfilm for this year at the NYPL to confirm this article.

[7] Platzker, "Chamber Studies..."

[8] "Great Building Boom on Lower East Side Predicted," *ESCN,* October 1928, p. 3.

began to venture back to the Lower East Side pushcarts in order to reminisce about the past. "The new east side," one merchant insisted, "is not lacking in 'gemutlichkeit' [a sense of being at ease, or cozy]."[9] And being at ease again was exactly what many ex-East Siders, recently moved uptown, craved, if only for an afternoon.

Some merchants specifically encouraged ex-East Siders to identify with the immigrant East Side. It was good for business, wrote one:

> Migration from the East Side does not break the ties which have been formed by many years of residence there. The old timers cannot bear to stay away. They return on Saturdays and Sundays and other holidays to renew old friendships, sniff at old aromas and wander up and down crowded and dirty streets that were once loved because they stood for home.[10]

Restaurants and cabarets increasingly catered to crowds craving to relive their childhoods or out for an adventure on the exotic East Side. "The more pretentious establishments, where the atmosphere is synthetically achieved," wrote one observer, "rely largely upon a trade of country cousins, visiting buyers and after-theater parties from uptown and Brooklyn, Westchester and New Jersey." In establishments such as these, patrons could sing nostalgic folk songs, especially those about mother, and home or "act Orchard Street" by singing loudly, bawdily, or raucously.[11]

Nostalgia was good for business but street life was harder to control than nightclubs, cabarets, and wine cellars. The pushcart markets could be used to attract customers, but only, merchants hoped, to clean and sanitary markets instead of to the streets. They considered the indoor markets a perfect solution. The "important thing," one merchant wrote, "is to put it on a dignified, business-like basis."[12]

What the merchants of the East Side failed to recognize, until it was too late, was the symbiotic nature of their relationship to the peddlers. They underestimated the power and appeal of a growing nostalgia towards the old East Side streets and the increasing development of the Lower East Side as a site for cultural pilgrimage. The merchants wanted to exploit this growing sentimentality on the part of ex-East Siders and non-East Siders alike, but they failed to see that this nostalgia depended on the continuation of traditional practices, not on a sanitary and spurious indoor re-creation. In fact, the

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[9] R. L. Duffus, "The East Side is Awakening to Its Glory of Olden Days," *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 1931, XX, 3-4. This article was reprinted several times in the *ESCN* symbolizing the merchants belief in the sentiments of the article.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Betram Reinitz, "The East Side Looks into Its Future," *New York Times Magazine*, March 13, 1932, 10 and "New York Roumanian Restaurants," Box 3621, Federal Writers' Project, Municipal Archives.

[12] Orrin C. Lester, "Conclusions on Public Market Situation," Address delivered to the New York Board of Trade on April 8, 1931, reprinted in *ESCN*, April 1931, p. 15.

merchants fight against the markets fanned the flames of nostalgia. As the campaign to remove the carts threatened the ethnic character of the Lower East Side, visitors and ex-Lower East Siders grew more and more wistful for the "good old days."

In trying to control and re-shape the East Side's nostalgic appeal the merchants ignored the fact that they were a part of it. Merchants found the peddlers a psychic threat, for little more than a front door and a bit of savings separated them from the pushcarts and their practices. Peddlers and merchants were tied to each other. Many merchants engaged in the same self-exploitation as the peddlers. They employed their entire families, often lived in the dark, back rooms of the store or above them and worked from five a.m. till eleven p.m. Stores were often no more than a "heap of junk;" many were in reality "sweat stores."[13] Many merchants were less than a step ahead of the peddlers on the rung of "success."

While business practices inside the stores and outside at the pushcarts were clearly not that different, merchants tried to distinguish themselves from the peddlers by reforming members of their own profession. Merchants hoped to help each other in improving "merchandising methods, general appearance and business management."[14]

Lower East Side merchant reformers were ashamed that many of their own scorned modern business methods. Mr. Hoffer, a store owner, for example, "felt that his customers wouldn't feel at home in a clean and up-to-date store. He felt that in Rome you should do as the Romans do." Merchant reformers chastised Mr. Hoffer for this attitude and for the lack of fixed prices on merchandise and goods scattered haphazardly throughout the store. After modernizing, reforming merchants pointed out, Hoffer "insists on having a clean apron" and he "has developed a dynamic drive for business where once he was content to sit on a pickle barrel and wait for it to come to him."[15]

Reforming merchants considered pricing merchandise as the clearest sign of modernization. The immigrant custom of haggling or bargaining would not be tolerated in stores. Treating customers courteously and promptly were other signs of advancement and assimilation.[16]

"Pulling-In" or "schlepping" was another custom which the merchants hoped to eradicate. In the shtetl, a store owner would stand "in front of his door calling in and, if need be, pulling potential customers in by their coat sleeves...he may even hire a boy to stand in the street and persuade customers,

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[13] Dr. Mark Soliterman, "The Small Retailer on the East Side," *ESCN*, December 1929, p. 17.

[14] Harry Morton Goldberg, *ESCN*, February 1930, p. 8.

[15] Ralph F. Linder, "Hoffer of the Lower East Side Modernizes," *ESCN*, March 1930, pp. 16-18.

[16] Colwin Lahm – Vice President of the Citizen's Savings Bank, "How to Put the Lower East Side Again on the Map," *ESCN*, July 1929, p. 8 and December 1929, p. 11. Lahm stated explicitly that much business done in the stores was conducted on Sundays and evenings – much like the pushcarts.

by words re-enforced with a persuasive hand on the elbow, to come in" [Zborowski and Herzog, 1952, pp. 63-4].[17] In 1930, the merchants "resolved to make war on this disgraceful practice, not only for the protection of the decent merchant of this section, but for the good name of the Lower East Side." The Chamber "intends to wage continuous warfare against them, which will not end until this disgraceful practice is stamped out."[18] In 1939, Mayor LaGuardia signed a law abolishing pulling-in and making it a misdemeanor, punishable by a $50 fine, 10 days in jail or both.[19] Despite this measure, pullers-in remained active.[20]

The lean years of the Depression stymied efforts of the Lower East Side merchant reformers but Fiorello LaGuardia took up the issue of the public markets with a vengeance upon his election to the mayoralty in 1934. The merchants had fought for almost ten years for indoor markets; with the help of the New Deal's unprecedented aid to cities, through the WPA, LaGuardia accomplished his goal in about five years. Despite protests, new laws forbade peddlers from selling merchandise on the street; those who could not afford an indoor stand were simply out of luck.[21] On December 1, 1938, the First Avenue Market opened.[22] A year later, the Essex Street Market followed.[23]

LaGuardia's opposition to the peddlers became an obsession. He attacked organ grinders, flower vendors and even the Good Humor Man.[24] LaGuardia believed that his willpower alone could transform peddlers into merchants. At the opening of one indoor market,

> LaGuardia launched into his address, and, suddenly, in the middle of it, stooped and picked up an apple from one of the stands. "There will be no more of this," he said as he pretended to spit on the apple... Pointing to his listeners in their crisp white coats, he concluded, "I found you pushcart peddlers... I have made you MERCHANTS![25]

Mr. Isadore Suranowitz, who had been a peddler on the same corner since 1913, believed in the mayor's alchemy. "Tomorrow" he said, "you'll see me in a clean shirt. No more like a peddler, I'll be a merchant." Unfortunately peddlers such as 53-year-old Giuseppe Sallemi would never make the move from peddler to merchant. He made $1 a day selling lemons and could not

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[17] The *WPA Guide to New York City* uses the term "shleppers," p. 117.

[18] Samuel Zirn "War On Pullers-In," *ESCN*, October 1930, p. 8.

[19] "'Puller-In' Banned As Retail Magnet," *New York Times*, April 12, 1939, 25:4. The reporter noted that some on the street did not favor the ban. Said one person, "So there's a law you shouldn't talk to people, huh?"

[20] *ESCN*, March 1941, p. 8.

[21] See *ESCN*, December 1937, p. 8; April 1937, p. 7 and July 1937, cover.

[22] *New York Herald Tribune*, December 1, 1938, 21:3-5.

[23] "Essex Street Market Opened," *New York Times*, January 14, 1940, IV, 2:6.

[24] See Morris, pp. 119-120 and Caro, p. 447.

[25] Morris [1955, pp. 119-120]. Caro [p. 447] writes that LaGuardia was "sensitive about his Italian immigrant ancestry" and banned organ grinders because of it.

possibly afford a stall indoors. Instead, he would join the ranks of the unemployed.[26] Peddling would no longer be a viable alternative to welfare or unemployment. The indoor markets put the poorest peddlers out of work permanently.[27]

To insure behavioral changes in their transformation into merchants, the indoor markets opened with revised rules and reflected LaGuardia's determination to "professionalize" peddlers. The rules now explicitly spelled out acceptable and unacceptable codes of behavior. Rules stated, for example, that peddlers "must, at all times, be courteous" and forbade "shouting or hawking by vendors" as well as "abusive and lewd language."[28] Furthermore, the markets would remain open on Saturdays and close on Sundays and now peddlers had to be citizens. Nothing could have more clearly shown contempt for the peddlers and their customers.[29]

According to a local policeman on Ludlow Street, East Side housewives would refuse to shop in the new indoor markets:

> The peddlers won't go there. The old women won't walk so far. They want pushcarts right in front of their houses or at least a block away. They want to be able to handle the stuff, pick it up, smell it, chose the best part of the lot. You take that bakery store down on the corner. Sells the same kind of bread as the pushcart fellows. Will the women buy it there? No, they won't.[30]

Max, of Max and Louise's Botanica and Flowers, one of the three remaining original stands in the Essex Street Market during the late 1980's, explained:

> I moved to Essex Street Market when it opened because they took the pushcarts away. People didn't come around like they used to... I figured once they take away the pushcarts they wouldn't

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[26] *New York Herald Tribune*, December 1, 1938, 21:3-5. Mr. Suranowitz was the president of the Lower First Avenue Indoor Market Association, formerly the First Avenue Peddlers Association. He handed out placards which read, "All for one, one for all," which, according to the article, was sneered at by the peddlers. One Anthony Sidoti had been on the same corner for 32 years and was not pleased about the change.

[27] Nathan Ausubel, "Hold Up the Sun! A Kaleidoscope of Jewish Life in New York," unpublished manuscript for Federal Writers' Project, "Jews of New York," Chapter "DeProfundis: Junk," pp. 29-30, Box 3633, FWP, Municipal Archives.

[28] See "Pink Slips Over The East Side," June, 1938, in Helen Hall Papers, Columbia.

[29] "Rules and Regulations re: Enclosed Public Markets, Formerly Open Air Pushcart Markets," Approved November 20, 1936, amended September 22, 1938 and 1941, Box 3639, LGA Papers, MA.

[30] "51 Pushcart Stables," *New York Sun*, n.d., clipping in East Side files, Markets and Pushcarts, Seward Park Library.

> bring the customers as much as they did before... Once the pushcarts went away the business died out."[31]

LaGuardia ignored local concerns and instead focused his ire at the growing nostalgia of tourists and pilgrims.[32] He simply did not "want to hear any more gushing sentimentality about the elimination of the picturesque pushcarts."[33]

In light of their imminent demise, some New Yorkers, previously disgusted by the open-air markets, began to feel nostalgic towards them:

> New York has suddenly taken on autumnal splendor – not so much on the part of its trees as on the part of its outdoor markets... [They] seem surprisingly fresh and attractive...to one previously scornful of pushcarts...we shall miss those curb stands that now lend so bright a touch of seasonal splendor to our metropolitan scene.[34]

Ironically, the East Side business community, which had fought for ten years to remove the embarrassing pushcarts, now complained that their removal irreparably damaged their trade.[35] The merchants were shocked to find that once the pushcarts disappeared they immediately experienced a drastic decline in trade.[36] By late 1941 the merchants on Orchard Street found that "the removal of the pushcarts...has reduced gross sales...approximately 60 percent... The removal of the pushcarts altered conditions considerably."[37]

Several writers mourned the passing of the pushcarts, but noted happily that at least "sidewalk stalls still manage to retain much of the color of the old pushcarts" and that the "sidewalk bazaars...in colorful profusion...still attract Jewish shoppers from all metropolitan districts"; therefore the East Side still retained "the charm of the tradition-soaked neighborhood for city residents and visiting tourists."[38]

The merchants were convinced that now that the pushcarts were gone, their stoop stand displays in front of their stores were their only defense against complete financial ruin. They understood, too late, the attraction of the outdoor carts and displays.

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[31] Interview with Essex Street merchants conducted for Citylore on March 18, 1988 by Kathleen Condon.

[32] *New York Times*, January 10, 1940, 23:1. LaGuardia asked the courts to enforce the city ban on pushcarts.

[33] *New York Daily News*, January 10, 1940, 30 illus.

[34] F. Smith, "Autumn Brings Color and Variety to Our Curb Markets," October 9, 1939, Box 3571, Oddities-Market file, FWP, MA.

[35] "$350,000 First Avenue Market at 10th Street Approved," *ESCN*, July 1937, cover.

[36] "Essex Street Market Opens," *ESCN*, January 1940, p. 9.

[37] "Chamber Director Wins Stoop-Stand License Fight Against License Commissioner," *ESCN*, October 1941, p. 4.

[38] Weed Dickinson, "The Jews of New York," Chapter 3, p. 2 in "Jews of New York," Box 3632, folder Jewish Communities: First Draft, marked 1/42 and Elita Lenz, "Delancey District Jews," pp.1-2, Box 3633, folder Jewish Communities – Lenz, FWP, MA.

Much to their shock, merchants realized that LaGuardia considered them to be as much a part of the "old world" problem of the East Side as the peddlers and their pushcarts. LaGuardia saw the stoopline stands as simply glorified pushcarts. An amendment to the administrative code now prohibited stoop-line stands, in addition to pushcarts.[39] Long advocates of renovation, many merchants became its victims. The merchants had been outcrusaded by LaGuardia [Rankin, 1945, p. 208]. The pushcarts represented the heart and soul of Lower East Side life both for the neighbors who shopped there and for the growing number of visitors and tourists. Although badly in need of reform, the changes planned for the markets had taken into account neither the tenacity of local tradition nor the strength of public sentiment.

Fifty years later Lower East Side merchants still regret the passing of the pushcarts. One recent plan by the Lower East Side Business Improvement District recommended the creation of a cobblestoned mall, complete with gaslights and replicas of pushcarts [Cheuvront, 1986, p. 20]. Sion Misrahi, president of the Lower East Side Merchants' Association, called for developing the East Side into "a major tourist attraction with jitneys linking it with South Street Seaport, Little Italy and Chinatown. "Bring back the old times," another demanded [Cheuvront 1986, p. 20].

Merchants are still fighting to get the city to lift its ban on stoopline stands which present law only allows them to set up on Sundays [Cheuvront, 1986, p. 20]. Stores depend on the image created by their outdoor stands to bring back customers for a taste of the past.

Merchants appear ignorant of the role their predecessors played in removing the carts from the streets. In the Lower East Side Merchants' Association's tourist guide the battle between merchants and peddlers is absent; rather, the present story goes that the "stores and the pushcart peddlers enjoyed a prosperous, non-conflicting relationship for many years, until in 1938, the City of New York swept the pushcarts off the streets...and herded them into the Essex Street retail markets" [Lower East Side Merchants' Association, 1987, p. 9].

Today, young and cutting edge clothes designers and restaurateurs seem to be again attracting customers by playing on an historical image. This time, it's not the pushcarts but the stores themselves which are now considered historical relics. Explained one young designer who recently moved into an Orchard Street storefront, "See that big scratch on the floor? We wanted it to be that way." In his store, Xuly-Bet Funkin' Fashion he even clear-coated the decayed paneling and peeling linoleum. "It's a continuum," explained another. "Once it was pushcart immigrants, now it's cutting-edge businesses" [Abramovitch, 1997].

Re-creations of the pushcart market extend beyond the physical landscape of the Lower East Side. It permeates the imagination of American Jewish memories. Come visit a "nostalgic recreated tour of the Lower East

[39] Ibid, p. 8.

Side" called "Fancy Delancey" invited Temple Sinai of Stamford, Connecticut. "Those attending will be able to relive the sights, sounds and smells of days gone by." This included "bargains and carts and stands...filled with egg creams, hot dogs, knishes, corned beef sandwiches, pickles and halvah."[40]

Battles between merchants and peddlers continue to plague the city. Recently the conflict reached a fevered pitch, not on the Lower East Side, but in Harlem, on 125th Street. With the influx of immigrants from the African continent over the past decade, 125th Street became crowded with as many as 1000 illegal vendors hawking trinkets, mudcloth, scented ointments, and services such as African hair weaving. Mayor Giuliani granted special licenses for illegal vendors as long as they moved to an empty lot set aside on 116th Street. In 1994, police descended on 125th Street in order to carry out the Mayor's plan and arrested 22 peddlers. Vendors promoted a boycott of non-black owned stores, even though some black merchants sided with the city. The debate generated passions not seen in years. Some storeowners, reminiscent of the Lower East Side merchants fifty years earlier, praised Giuliani as the vendors did not pay taxes, contributed to congestion and damaged legitimate businesses. And like earlier pleas for tolerance, some called the action misguided because it deprived vendors of meager incomes that kept them off welfare.[41]

Not surprisingly, as soon as the vendors were removed, some merchants began to complain that the removal of the pushcarts and the crowds they attracted hurt their business.[42] "Do you think that these buses come all the way uptown just so tourists can drive past McDonald's?" asked Richard Bartee, a poet and community activist.[43]

One year later though, at least some members of the community claimed success.[44] Others, though insisted that they would "wait until this quiets down and – perhaps, perhaps – slip back."[45] Their efforts, though, may be futile. Black-owned businesses are being forced to close as The Disney Store and The Gap move onto 125th Street.

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[40] Announcement, *Greenwich Times*, April 7, 1984, A5.

[41] See *New York Times*, October 23, 1994, I, 42-1.

[42] see *New York Times*, October 31, 1994, B, 1:5.

[43] Guy Trebay, "Market Drive," *Village Voice*, November 1, 1994, p. 33-4.

[44] See *New York Times*, August 27, 1995, XIII-CY, 6:1.

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