

# History After the Eleventh

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What value is history after September 11th? Very little if it's true—as we hear so often now—that *nothing* for us will ever be the same again. Of course it *is* true that no New Yorker alive today will ever forget the bravery of those \$30,000 a year police and firefighters, who never flinched, or gave a thought to their own safety—the working people of New York City who raced into the Tower to save those who earned ten, twenty a hundred times what they earned. Some acts are sanctifying. Forever transforming the earth we stand on. And yet, on the day after the tragedy, on September 12th, Donald Trump said he stood ready to build the world's tallest tower on that same ground, on the site of the WTC. *Some things*, we can safely assume, *will* remain the same.

We hear too, that because of the crisis following September 11th, the legal foundation of the city's political institutions for the last 200 years can no longer stand. Up till now when an official's term expires, the occupant is legally bound to leave. But because of the extraordinary times we live in, it's said, the present occupant must be allowed to continue in office. Until recently, the most cited poet of September 11th has been W.H. Auden. His "September 1st, 1939" seems to contain uncanny premonitions of our disaster. "The unmentionable odor of death / Offends the September night." Perhaps though, it might be useful to

recall his equally prescient contemporary Bertolt Brecht who wrote: “Those who lead the country into the abyss call ruling too difficult for ordinary men.”

If the tragedy of September 11th can be exploited politically, to promote a sense of total rupture with our history, it can also be abused by economic interests to stimulate the need for a false continuity with the past. The aim of the terrorists, we are told, was to destroy New York’s position as the Global Capital. In this, naturally, they must not succeed. To defeat them, we must rebuild Downtown in a way that it is greater and better than ever before. Says the Mayor, the new towers must be “very large”. Globalisation now more than ever.

But how are these authorities able to interpret exactly what the terrorists meant? How can they be so sure of their own interpretive powers? Confidence could come from the familiar postmodern method and its assumptions. The world and everything in it is a text. We don’t need to know the identity of its author. Meanings are imposed by interpreters. Ultimately it’s *power* that determines knowledge and validity.

In its complete subjectivity and arbitrariness, postmodern hermeneutics has a lot in common with pre-modern hermeneutics. With ancient Roman divination—augury—which explained to fearful Romans what to do after disasters by interpreting the paths of bird flights. There was also scapulomancy—the analysis of shoulder blade bones which were said to reveal the proper course of action when burned in the sacred fire.

Ultimately, though, we don’t need pre or post modern hermeneutics. What ought to determine our civic response is not what the terrorists’ mean. But what

we mean. Not their motives and intentions but our common interests and needs. If the question is, “Must New York remain true to its vocation as the world’s Global Capital?” the discipline we need to guide us is not hermeneutics, but *history*.

Again and again it’s said New York has become the “nerve center of global capitalism.” New Yorkers are described as bestriding the pinnacle of the planetary food chain. Do we really? How did we get there? Is downtown and particularly the creation of the WTC a response in concrete and travertine to the city’s increasing dependence on World Trade?

Downtown as a response to globalization and its market forces? Three quick historical observations. (i) Downtown’s post WWII development has to be understood as primarily a *local* product of *local* development. The movement to build the twin towers originates in a pre-WWI reaction to the location of the city’s two main railroad terminals in midtown. A development that isolated downtown and threatened its survival; (ii). Postwar Downtown development has been a hugely subsidized government response; one that relied chiefly on state power and eminent domain in order to *overcome* market forces. (iii) the postwar downtown was created by cutting off the city from the physical flow of world trade that was its original reason for being.

In this century, there have been two downtowns. Neither arose as a response to global market forces. The early twentieth-century downtown was a national center, the product of the port, the Erie Canal, and the Brooklyn Bridge. It lasted until the fifties. The second downtown was an effort to create artificially

through state power, state planning and state subsidy the three elements of a Central Business District that the area below Chambers Street had come to lack: (a) mass transit—so that employees can get to office buildings; (b) an upper class residential neighborhood to provide consumers for luxury shops; and (c) private risk capital in office buildings....

Prior to WWI, downtown had all three. What changed everything was the advent of the two great midtown terminals. In 1910, the Pennsylvania Railroad built a terminal at 34th Street and 7th Avenue. Between 1903 and 1913 the New York Central developed Grand Central Station at 42nd and Lex. After making one commute to midtown, commuters don't feel like making another downtown. When leases expired, corporations and financial institutions began to move uptown. Downtown construction stopped dead. No major towers would be built downtown for almost half a century.

(ii) The city's real estate establishment—then organized as the Regional Plan Association—expressed its concern in the 1920's. Their dilemma was obvious: land owners couldn't move their land uptown to where the buildings and tenants had gone. How to staunch the flow? How to get people and investment moving back downtown? As early as 1921, the *New York Times* suggested moving the port of New York to Newark. Why? The port and its traffic created a clutter that depressed real estate values. So did the manufacturing linked to the Port.

The port had to go. More people had to come. In the 20's, the Second Avenue Subway was planned to get more of the right people downtown. But

while the Depression brought an unprecedented volume federal funds, none came down for a Second Ave. subway. In 1941, it looked though as if New York state would come through. Legislation was passed to move the port to New Jersey; create a downtown WTC and establish a WTC corporation headed by Chase Bank's Winthrop Aldrich. Executive action however was stymied by Pearl Harbor and then WWII National defense priorities precluded moving the nation's most vital port in wartime.

(iii) It wasn't until the 'fifties that the political moment ripened. This time Aldrich's nephew Nelson Rockefeller was Governor. From Albany he controlled appointments to the Port Authority which controlled jurisdiction over port location. Under Nelson, the PA would remove the port and build the towers, becoming city's largest landlord. Nelson's brother, David, was chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank and chair of the DLMA—the two Rockefeller brothers led the downtown urban renewal effort. Neither gave even a fleeting thought to relying on market forces or private capital to shape the second downtown. More relevant was the power of eminent domain that cleared the old Radio Row, the retail electrical district of 30,000 workers and small business people.

Besides more publicly financed office towers to irrigate parched downtown portfolios, what was the ultimate point? It was clearly expressed by the City's 1969 plan which expressed the higher real estate consciousness: "In the long run, New York does not want to retain the low skill, low wage segment of its industrial mix. The displacement of manufacturing activity in the CBD is the complement to the expansion of office construction which results in more

intensive land use, higher investments and more jobs than the manufacturing activities they replaced.”

1969 marked the city’s all-time jobs peak: 3.9 million. Between 1960 and the present, the city would lose nearly three quarters of a million manufacturing jobs. But it would never gain enough higher end jobs to prevent NYC from becoming the low labor force participation capital of America. From leading in income inequality; urban poverty and citizens without health insurance.

Meanwhile, what sustained private real estate enterprise downtown was public subsidies. Billions in subsidies for the PATH that brought commuters; billions in subsidies for rich residents who lived in BPC and consumed in Tribeca. Hundreds of millions to the NYSE and the Comex who extorted tax benefits in exchange for not moving across the river to New Jersey. Of course the deficits exacted a cost: despite the nineties boom the only US cities more indebted on a per capita basis than New York are Philadelphia, which just emerged from bankruptcy, and Detroit, where grass and trees grow on the *tops* of its tall buildings.

And yet, despite globalization, despite the growing debt and rising subsidies, as late as 1993, it still looked as if the Second downtown would had failed.. The Downtown Alliance—the successor to DLMA—seemed finally to recognize the futility of forty years of state planning to return downtown to its pre WWI glory. The next new idea: a plan based on public subsidies to convert the office core to residential space. But then came the great Wall Street technobubble. The old megalomania quickly returned. Far from being a second rate, artificial

CBD, downtown touted itself as the nerve center of world capitalism. The capital of the global economy. Still, while Wall Street bonuses broke all records, FIRE employment in the bubble years of the nineties never even came close to reaching the peak of the Koch era boom of the eighties.

The first years of the third millennium are turning into a decade of lost illusions: of American invulnerability; the End of History, the New Economy, of Wall Street as the cornucopia of wealth and security for all. Another illusion which we could well shed is the notion of Gotham as a natural adaptation to the global ecology. This time though, if we decide to rebuild New York's economic foundations directly on the fault line created by the churning magma of financial speculation, at least let's not pretend that history tells us we have no alternative.