

## **Swept Away: Public Work and the Politics of Employment in New York City's Parks**

**John Krinsky and Maud Simonet**

*Upwards of 4,000 unionized civil-service workers once cleaned and maintained New York City's parks. Today about 1,800 such workers share this task with volunteers, employees of nonprofit organizations on contract with the city, community-service sentencees, and former welfare recipients doing temporary parks work in hopes of obtaining permanent positions. John Krinsky and Maud Simonet trace the evolving political economy of parks work in New York, demonstrating its impact on workers. They also highlight the power of rhetoric to shape opinion leaders' and voters' perceptions of how city administrators should organize public work and govern public assets.*

### **Same tools, different workers**



This is a grabber. It is used to pick up trash. If you walk around New York City parks today, you may find this tool in the hands of a number of very different people. Take Alvin, Jamie, Carole, and Jackson, four of the more than 120 people we interviewed for our book *Who Cleans the Park? Public Work and Urban Governance in New York City*.<sup>1</sup> Alvin is a Parks Department supervisor who

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo25338739.html>.

has worked for decades in the department in “all the titles, from rank to file.” He still sometimes picks up trash alongside the entry-level civil-service City Parks Workers and Job Training Program participants (JTPs) who work in his district. JTPs like Jamie, a 19-year-old mother, are former welfare recipients placed into temporary jobs in the Parks Department. Carole is a volunteer and coordinator of a group that are “friends of” a park, and who help to care for it. These groups began to proliferate, with the help of the city, in the 1990s and now number in the hundreds. And Jackson worked for 19 years for the Central Park Conservancy—a large nonprofit with an official contract to manage the park—until he and 30 coworkers were suddenly fired one morning in January 2009.

Taken together, Alvin, Jamie, Carole, and Jackson symbolize four decades of changes in the system to maintain New York City’s parks. These changes have been marked by significant reductions in the full-time, unionized public workforce and the proliferation of new working arrangements, from workfare to welfare-to-work training programs to community-service sentencees, and from several kinds of volunteers to private “conservancy” staff.

What does a public workplace look like when services are no longer primarily delivered by public workers? How does the maintenance of a public resource—a city’s parks—function when so many different types of workers are responsible for basic tasks? We argue that the restructuring of parks maintenance in New York City since the city’s fiscal crisis in the 1970s has led to a system that combines less security, more at-will employment, and greater discretion for (and potential for abuse by) managers with a double-sided moral discourse of reciprocity and celebration of private initiative. This is manifest in a language of “giving back” for volunteers and “paying back” for welfare recipients, and in the idea that granting philanthropists control over public resources is democratic.

We trace the development of New York’s park maintenance over the past four decades, marking its contradictions. While most of our interviews were conducted from 2008 to 2011, during the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, we note some rhetorical and programmatic shifts under the current mayor, Bill de Blasio. The Parks Department has also recently hired new civil-service staff in response to real downturns in maintenance and safety. Nevertheless, amid controversy over the role of parks conservancies, arguments over the fate of workfare programs, and questions about the power of philanthropists, we find that institutionalized neoliberalism and its moral justifications (see Muehlebach 2013) remain difficult to shake loose. In large measure, this is because the Alvins, Jamies, Caroles, and Jacksons of the city remain invisible to each other in the current system.

## **A combined and uneven workforce**

In 1978, just after the fiscal crisis, 4,028 civil-service workers were employed in parks maintenance and operations (Brecher and Horton 1993, p. 312). That number has declined by 55% to 1,802 today.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1970s, the general framework for maintenance was to assign parks a fixed-post “parkie.” In the early 1980s, the Parks Department largely switched to mobile crews, which travel in a van from park to park, cleaning up litter as they go. Since the mid-1990s, entry-level civil-service workers have been cut, too, with the number of people in the entry-level City Parks Worker title dropping from 1,272 to just over 800 in the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> The number has rebounded in two steps over the last eight years, to 1,153 today, still more than 100 fewer citywide than 25 years ago.<sup>4</sup> Most workers on mobile crews have either been workfare workers, forced to “work off” their welfare checks (this was prevalent during the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the early 2000s), or job-training participants (more common today, as the workfare

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2017/03/846-DPR.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [www.researchgate.net/profile/Laura\\_Wernick/publication/307134121\\_WEP\\_Work\\_Experience\\_ProgramNew\\_York\\_City's\\_Public\\_Sector\\_Sweatshop\\_Economy/links/57c4756908ae9b0c824c2529.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Laura_Wernick/publication/307134121_WEP_Work_Experience_ProgramNew_York_City's_Public_Sector_Sweatshop_Economy/links/57c4756908ae9b0c824c2529.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://seethroughny.net/payrolls/city-of-new-york>.

program has ended under current mayor Bill de Blasio). Some mobile crews are also made up of people who have been sentenced to community service for misdemeanors.

To add to the diversity of people working in the parks, volunteers like Carole may have the keys to the park downstairs from their buildings, while others show up once a week, and still others are corporate “volunteers” on team-building days with the company. Volunteers may do routine trash collection, weeding and bulb planting or other horticulture projects, or large-scale painting projects. They nearly never do the dirtiest work, like cleaning bathrooms.

Conservancy workers, like Jackson, do almost the same job as city park employees but for a different wage, different benefits and no bargaining rights or union grievance procedures.

In any *particular* park, however, you will not likely find all these different workers working *together*. This is first because the institutional arrangements that brought them all to maintaining New York City’s parks developed piecemeal over decades, reflecting the policy priorities current at each juncture. Alongside this, each institutional innovation established itself in a geography of parks in a city that is both racially and economically segregated and variegated by the dominant types of properties managed by the Parks Department—large parks, small parks, playgrounds, beaches.

The Parks Department intervened in this geography significantly. It helped to found the Central Park Conservancy, Prospect Park Alliance, and Bryant Park Corporation in the early 1980s as the city and a range of philanthropists sought ways to reorganize and revitalize parks maintenance and capital investment. Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, did not have access to the money that Central Park had from its posh neighbors or that Bryant Park had from the businesses in its vicinity and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. While the latter two conservancies moved quickly to hire their own workers to replace city workers, Prospect Park was left largely to encourage volunteering and to rely on the city’s growing reliance on workfare workers during the 1990s. It, in turn, was a model for the city’s late-1990s founding of the Partnerships for Parks, which helps to organize volunteers citywide into “friends of” organizations to support local parks with contributions of both labor and money.

### **Managing parks, managing visibility**

The separation of the different types of workers engaged in many of the same tasks is no accident. We were struck by how often volunteers were kept separate from Job Training Program workers and workfare workers. Perhaps less surprising is the fact that community-service sentencees typically work in their own crews, supervised by a City Park Worker “crew chief,” or occasionally with JTP workers. Nevertheless, the separation of volunteers from other workers is pronounced. One park manager told us that she could not have an executive who was contributing his work for free see workfare workers’ lack of discipline. A different separation occurred when the Central Park Conservancy hired its first staff in the early 1980s. In order to avoid too much protest from the unions, the Conservancy management called their staff “interns” and installed them in a separate building from the Parks Department staff.

The separation of workers accomplishes several things, including hiding things that need to be hidden in order that the system “work.” This includes such a significant incidence of sexual harassment and a “sexual economy” that our interviews began to include questions about it after numerous JTP workers mentioned it early. Because JTPs are mainly younger Black and Latina women, because they are supervised mainly by men, and because the six-month JTP position holds out a rarely realized promise of extension or full-time hire, some supervisors and crew chiefs use their power to recommend workers up the chain of command as a means of gaining sexual access to the workers. Occasionally, this has broken through into public view, as when supervisors asked JTP workers to pole-dance at a Christmas party and photographs were published in the *Daily News* (Otis 2013). The supervisors were not fired.

At the same time, successive administrations have variously cynically and sincerely used languages of reciprocity to justify the changes in the parks maintenance regime. Whether it was Mayor Giuliani's 1998 pronouncement<sup>5</sup> that "for every benefit there is an obligation, for every right there is a duty" to justify the unpaid labor of his workfare program or the ubiquity of the idea that volunteers are "giving back to communities," the power of a liberal discourse of reciprocal exchange undergirds the various institutional changes we observed. Its apotheosis may be in the claim of a former parks commissioner that it would be "undemocratic" to redirect philanthropic donations from highly funded parks to ones needing more funds.

The complexity of this strange universe is only partially visible to Alvin, Jamie, Carole, Jackson, and the thousands of others who clean New York City's parks. Alvin can see that he has more discretion about how he treats his supervisees than he should (he is uncomfortable about this). Jamie considers the promise—unfulfilled in more than 95% of cases—of further employment. Carole perceives the problems of conservancies' lack of public accountability. And Jackson feels first-hand the results of working under an at-will contract with no union protections, in spite of nearly two decades of service. Each has what might be called a "contradictory consciousness" (Gramsci 1971) of their work. Each understands that something is wrong. But without being mutually visible, they cannot develop a larger, integrated analysis of how the things that are wrong relate to each other. Though it is by no means a foregone conclusion that a well-to-do corporate volunteer would worry about the sexual harassment of a single mother in a workfare program, or about union-busting, favoritism and arbitrary supervision in a conservancy, the separation of workers by status also produces a segregation of concern that is structured by class, race, and gender. It is easy, then, to fall back on the tropes that have already been supplied.

### **More than recreation**

Also usually hidden, but occasionally made visible, are the ways in which park maintenance enhances private profit and how this happens through work in the nonprofit and public sectors. One clear way this occurs is through the premiums that accrue to real estate value near well-maintained parks. For the Bryant Park Corporation, this enhancement is an explicit part of its mission. For the more philanthropic Central Park Conservancy, the connection was the basis for a report<sup>6</sup> that was meant to show the extent to which investment in the park was effective and aligned the public interest with private ones. Yet the report says little about how part of this enhanced property value is contributed by people working in contingent arrangements who are poorly paid—or even unpaid.

Further, the state of the parks workforce is a by-product of a longer-term, significant erosion of the parks maintenance and operating budgets. The austerity imposed on parks has been partially compensated by the rise of conservancies and mass volunteering, and by welfare reform and criminal justice reforms. But the longer-term switch to mobile crews—beginning in the 1980s—that the degradation of the parks workforce enabled meant that some parks, often in poor neighborhoods, lost their caretakers. It meant a longer-term pattern of neglect and superficial cleaning whereby it may be easier to replace park and playground features and equipment than to keep them in good working order. Thus, capital expenditures funded by bonds—which in turn pay private interest—supplant a more thoroughgoing maintenance program, just as a low-paid, contingent workforce has supplanted the (still low-paid), secure, unionized workforce of the pre-crisis era.

We see parks not just as places for public recreation, but also as sites of private accumulation (direct and indirect), of exploitation, and of organizational change. Studying parks maintenance tells us not just about the conditions at parks workplaces, but also about the larger dynamics of urban

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www1.nyc.gov/html/rwg/html/98a/forumclb.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See: [www.appleseedinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Valuing-Central-Parks-Contributions-to-New-York-City-Economy.pdf](http://www.appleseedinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Valuing-Central-Parks-Contributions-to-New-York-City-Economy.pdf).



change that drive those conditions. In a political sense, we all have an interest in—and a responsibility for—how the park gets cleaned.

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**John Krinsky** is associate professor of political science at the City College of New York and the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center, with an interest in labor and community organizing in New York. He specializes in urban politics, the politics of social movements, and the politics of work, welfare and labor. He is a co-editor of *Metropolitiques* and a co-editor of the journal *Social Movement Studies*. He co-coordinates the Politics and Protest Workshop at the CUNY Graduate Center and is a founding board member of the New York City Community Land Initiative (website: [www.nyccli.org](http://www.nyccli.org)).

His publications include *Free Labor: Workfare and the Contested Language of Neoliberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and a co-edited volume, *Marxism and Social Movements* (with Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen; Leiden: Brill, 2013). With Maud Simonet, he has recently published *Who Cleans Your Park? The Transformation of Work in the Public Sector in New York City*.

**Maud Simonet** is a researcher with the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and assistant director of the IDHES (Institutions et Dynamiques Historiques de l'Économie et de la Société – Institutions and Historical Dynamics of Economy and Society) research unit at the University of Paris-Nanterre. She has conducted research projects in France and in the United States on volunteer work, civic service, workfare and more broadly on work invisibilization and contemporary issues around free labor.

She published *Le Travail bénévole. Engagement citoyen ou travail gratuit ?* (“Volunteer Work: Civic Engagement or Free Labor?”) with La Dispute in 2010. With John Krinsky, she has recently published *Who Cleans Your Park? The Transformation of Work in the Public Sector in New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

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