

Two-tier system in New York City parks

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The growing social inequality characterizing New York City extends to the most basic public services, including the city's park system.

Central Park, designed in the nineteenth century by the team of Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, is deservedly world famous. One of the city's main tourist attractions, it is also located in the center of Manhattan's wealthiest neighborhoods. The park, seriously affected by the city's fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, has been revived over the last two decades with the crucial injection of nearly a quarter-billion dollars raised from millionaire donors by a private organization, the Central Park Conservancy. Meanwhile dozens of other parks in working class areas of all five boroughs of the city have suffered from drastic spending cuts.

The number of park employees has been cut by more than half since 1990, from 4,507 to 2,190. Moreover, the 4,500 figure itself represented a substantial decrease from the approximately 7,000 working in the parks in the mid-1980s. The staff of the Parks Department remains at its lowest level for decades despite the record boom on Wall Street, which has produced budget surpluses for the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

The city has been steadily withdrawing from its responsibility to provide for the maintenance, let alone expansion, of the park system. This policy shift began in the aftermath of the massive budget crisis of a quarter-century ago. Cuts in public services which began at that time were often only partially restored as the city's finances improved. The impact of these cuts can be seen today in crumbling schools and underfunded hospitals and clinics.

The Central Park Conservancy was founded soon after the city's near-bankruptcy. Before the term "privatization" became widely used, the conservancy was developing its own partial version of this policy, supplanting public funding with donations raised from multimillionaire corporate executives, most of whom happened to live on or near Fifth Avenue, along the eastern edge of the park.

The conservancy, which now raises about \$15 million every year from private sources, was given official responsibility for running Central Park under a contract

agreed to by the city last year. Nearly 80 percent of the park's employees are on the conservancy's payroll.

The much smaller Bryant Park, in the midst of midtown near Grand Central Terminal and the main branch of the Public Library, has also been lavishly funded through the work of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation. The rest of the city's parks, however, have little or nothing in terms of private funding sources. The Parks Department has set up the City Parks Foundation. It raises only about half as much as the conservancy, which must then be distributed to the dozens of parks around the five boroughs.

A recent feature in the *New York Times* provides some background on how the conservancy has turned Central Park into a popular charity for the wealthy.

Eighty percent of the \$233 million raised by the conservancy in the last 20 years has come from 20 percent of its donors. Hundreds of its largest donors live within one block of the park.

The area east of the park includes the wealthiest census tracts in the United States, as measured by per capita income. Central Park West also has its share of millionaires and prominent figures. Only on the northern end of the park, adjoining the southern tip of Harlem, are the wealthy in very short supply.

The charitable contributions to Central Park, in many cases small change for the multimillionaires who donate them, are not really philanthropic gifts in the same sense as those given to hospitals or universities. Because of the proximity of the park to the wealthy Upper East Side, it has more and more taken on the character of the lawn or "back yard" of the fabulously rich. The donations are solicited with this in mind, as a way of the rich giving to themselves, and not so much to the poor or to the public at large. They gain tax benefits and are thanked for their generosity, while they show off their donations to friends and business clients.

As Michael Bloomberg, founder of the Bloomberg Financial Markets and a member of the conservancy's board of directors, who lives half a block from "his" park, put it: "The park is visible, you can touch it, you can partake of it, you can brag about it, you can see the difference your money makes."

Richard Gilder, a stockbroker who lives on Fifth Avenue, has given \$17 million, believed to be the largest gift from any individual to any municipal park. “It is upbeat,” said Gilder. “There are so few things you can give money to that aren’t in desperate shape.”

Furthermore, the donations are regarded almost as part of the cost of doing business in the closely knit world of Wall Street and corporate New York. Henry R. Kravis, the billionaire leveraged buyout specialist, led the way in raising \$65 million for the conservancy during the 1980s because he had the business connections. Public relations mogul Howard Rubinstein explained, “If he helps your charity, then you must help his.... In the upper echelons of millionaires’ row, it is almost like a trade.”

About 1,200 contributors to the conservancy gather each spring for a luncheon sponsored by the conservancy’s women’s committee. A founding member of this committee is Phyllis Cerf Wagner, the widow of former Mayor Robert F. Wagner and of Bennett Cerf, the co-founder of Random House publishers. Mrs. Wagner, who has helped raise \$30 million from wealthy friends, calls the annual luncheon “the envy of the world.” “It is May,” she explained. “Everyone has spring clothes. They have new hats.”

There is nothing unusual about the wealthy enjoying their charity balls, of course. What makes this unusual is the conservancy’s role as the main benefactor and administrator of New York City’s best known park.

There is obviously nothing wrong with the upgrading of Central Park, and many thousands of working people also take advantage of its facilities and pleasures. There is a very big difference between private and public funding of the improvements, however. Private donors pick and choose, while public funding allows for the equitable distribution of resources. The consequences are clear in New York today. Millions of workers and the poor throughout the city do not live near Central Park and are not in a position to make regular excursions there. In their neighborhoods the parks are seedy, their playgrounds, restrooms and water fountains often broken or in poor condition.

The growing disparities have come in for increasing criticism. The Parks Council is a 90-year-old nonprofit advocacy group which monitors the parks and encourages their use, proper maintenance and expansion. Elizabeth Cooke, the executive director of the Council, told the *Times* that her group is “concerned that this is creating a two-tiered park system in New York City; one rich, one not.”

Ms. Cooke also pointed out that the contract signed last year between the Central Park Conservancy and the Giuliani administration guarantees that the city will provide \$1 million a year for Central Park if the conservancy raises \$5 million, and match half of additional amounts up to a

maximum city contribution of \$2 million. Thus, even more public funding flows to Central Park, which obviously leaves less for all the rest. “It gives Central Park protection against city budget cuts,” said Ms. Cooke. “Other parks are not similarly protected.”

Ms. Cooke, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, added, “The city of New York is relinquishing by degrees its role in maintaining and managing programs in its parks.” The Parks Council hopes “for an equitable distribution of resources and that services be provided as much as possible for every neighborhood and every household.

“The reliance on the largesse of donors almost always results in benefits to services that the donors know best, and so this current policy is resulting in the continuing improvement and beautification of Central Park and Bryant Park, while Thomas Jefferson Park at First Avenue and 112th St. [in East Harlem], for instance, has unusable ballfields.”

An important factor helping to make the parks cutbacks politically possible has been the use in recent years of welfare recipients as a source of cheap labor to replace thousands of laid-off city employees. Welfare “reform”, the so-called welfare-to-work program signed into law by Clinton three years ago, has forced tens of thousands of the poor in New York City to perform the functions of city workers at minimum wage. The parks department currently uses 5,500 participants in the Work Experience Program, who work 18 hours a week. This translates into the work of 2,900 full-time employees—in other words about as many jobs as have been eliminated in the parks in the past decade.

The workfare workers receive neither decent pay nor any benefits. Their working conditions are abysmal. They are also not allowed to provide recreation services or participate in any programs which would expand and improve the use of the parks. Their only job is to keep the parks clean. This has become a kind of stopgap maintenance program. The Giuliani administration has used it to claim that, even as Central Park has been restored as a jewel in the city’s crown, the rest of the system is not suffering.

The real implications of the present policy will reveal themselves when the next budget crisis hits, and it becomes apparent that there are no more cuts to be made without closing down some city parks entirely.



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