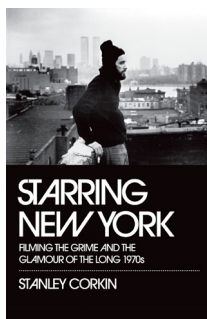
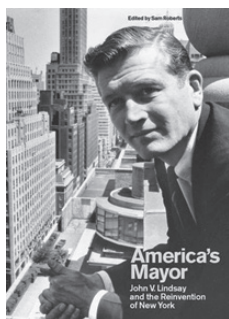


*Review Essay*

**“New York is the greatest city in the world—and everything is wrong with it”: New York City in the Era of John Lindsay**

**Sunny Stalter-Pace**



AMERICA'S MAYOR: John V. Lindsay and the Reinvention of New York. Edited by Sam Roberts. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

STARRING NEW YORK: Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s. By Stanley Corkin. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011.

SUMMER IN THE CITY: John Lindsay, New York, and the American Dream. Edited by Joseph P. Viteritti. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2014.

On January 25, 1965, the *New York Herald Tribune* featured a series titled “New York City in Crisis.” The opening article proclaimed: “New York is the greatest city in the world—and everything is wrong with it.”<sup>1</sup> This lede yokes together exceptionalism and disaster; a pairing that has become increasingly more common in contemporary American political discourse. Crisis and exceptionalism are two sides of the same coin, and they both shut down discussion about everyday economic and social structures. New York City had of course been in crisis before—Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* was one of the most important texts from an earlier moment of financial inequality and urban renewal. Yet the *Herald Tribune* article makes its list of problems so exhaustive that it is difficult to see any reason for the continued belief in exceptionalism or any way to begin moving forward.

“New York City in Crisis” achieved the implicit goals of the paper’s editors and publisher: to discourage incumbent mayor Robert Wagner from running for a fourth term (Roberts 11). The only suggestion for how change can be brought about comes late in the article: “Representative John V. Lindsay, a young Republican mentioned increasingly as a candidate for mayor,” suggests that the right sort of executive might convince city dwellers to take responsibility for their own city.<sup>2</sup> By the time the first “New York City in Crisis” article was published, Lindsay had made a name for himself as a progressive Republican from the “Silk Stocking District” on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, siding with the Democrats to pass the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and supporting a number of other important liberal bills. By the time the articles were turned into a book in July of the same year, Lindsay had declared his opposition to the Vietnam War and declared his candidacy for mayor of New York City. Congressman Lindsay was an embodiment of the personality-driven, optimistic liberalism of the early 1960s. The complexity of the city in crisis, he felt, could be cut through by someone with strong morals and a deep well of affection for his hometown. Lindsay is quoted in the article as saying,

You hear a lot of people say that the city is too big to be governed by one man. I don’t agree with that at all. It’s just a cliché. But to run this city properly and get it going again, the Mayor has to be very tough. He’s got to ask for the moon and he’s got to convince the people to make sacrifices. It will take a man who loves the city and a man who loves its people. If we don’t get going again soon, New York will become a second-class city.<sup>3</sup>

Here we get a sense of the sheer force of his charisma and the immensity of local, national, and international forces against which his administration had to struggle. As the poster-boy for progressive urban politics in this period, Lindsay was dependent on both sides of the “city in crisis” trope: the unique qualities of city space and the unique problems it posed.

Earlier writers about John Lindsay have understood 1965 as a turning point in different terms. In his retrospective essay from 1995 in the conservative journal *The Public Interest*, George Will says of 1965, “That year was the hinge of our postwar history.”<sup>4</sup> For Will, and for John Lindsay’s most recent biographer Vincent Cannato, this is true because 1965 is the height of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs and the activist Warren Supreme Court. Cannato’s comprehensive but rightward-leaning biography, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (2001) sees in Lindsay’s service as mayor a story about “the decline of the city and the crisis of liberalism.”<sup>5</sup> Refracted through the broken-windows policing of the Giuliani administration, Lindsay’s city seems to mark the end of a political era. But in the contemporary moment, when critics on the left and right agree that current New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio shares many qualities with John Lindsay, the story of Lindsay as a naïve liberal deserves another look.<sup>6</sup> Two recent books reconsider Lindsay’s reputation and impact, while a third looks at the crime films of the 1970s as exemplars of the city Lindsay worked in, grappled with, and left to his successor Abe Beame. Taken together, they give scholars a clear sense of the ways that history, economics, geography, and culture intersect in contemporary urban studies.

*America’s Mayor*, edited by *New York Times* writer Sam Roberts, is a companion to an exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York that was mounted in 2010 and remains online at <http://americasmayor.mcny.org>. The fifteen essays included in the text are mostly authored by reporters, though there are solid essays by urban studies stalwarts Hilary Ballon and Kenneth Jackson, as well as Lindsay staffers, architects, and even a current conservative think-tank fellow reflecting on the administration’s spending priorities and racial politics. “Most of the authors,” according to Roberts, “witnessed the Lindsay era for themselves, but as outsiders without the baggage of having to second-guess their own record” (7). The essays in *America’s Mayor* take an equally journalistic tone, avoiding academic terms commonly used in urban studies. There’s not even a mention of neoliberalism. Instead, the essays move in roughly chronological fashion through Lindsay’s career, beginning with his 1965 campaign and discussing the identity politics, labor disputes, budget concerns, and management of the built environment during his two terms in office. A few themes coalesce over the course of the book, and they tend to appear in pairs emphasizing their interrelation: Lindsay’s sympathy for African-American and Puerto Rican New Yorkers and his estrangement from labor unions and other bastions of “white lower middle class” power (110); and his administration’s move toward increased departmental efficiency and its financial difficulties that would eventually lead to New York City’s bankruptcy in 1975. The final essays consider Lindsay’s reputation and the impact that his practices had on later administrations, which are particularly clear in the arenas of data tracking and urban planning.

Though it functions separately from the museum exhibit, *America’s Mayor* maintains an exhibit-like format: interleaved among the retrospective essays and striking photographs of the period are pull-quotes and longer reflections, often

from Lindsay staffers and other politicians doing some degree of second-guessing. Most interesting to me, and perhaps to the *American Studies* readership as well, are the extracts from primary sources that played an important part in shaping Lindsay's public image. The primary sources reinforce many of the claims made in the retrospective essays: that Lindsay was too patrician, for instance, or that his presence in Harlem on the night of Martin Luther King's assassination helped prevent riots there. The selection of these artifacts emphasizes the role of local newspapers in Lindsay's rise and fall. Along with the "City in Crisis" series, Roberts includes a column about the campaign that spawned the slogan "He is fresh and everyone is tired" (14–15) and another that chided the newly sworn in mayor for proclaiming that New York, then suffering through a transit strike, was still a "fun city" (19–20). There are other sources—transcripts of campaign commercials and Nixon tapes—but readers come away from this book with the sense that his reputation was made in the city papers. At least in the late 1960s and early 1970s, all politics was still local.

Where *America's Mayor* aims for breadth and inclusivity in its reconsideration of John Lindsay, *Summer in the City* aims for depth. With nine extensively footnoted chapters to the Roberts book's fifteen, the Viteritti edited collection is more explicitly academic in its allegiances. And though *America's Mayor* tries to encompass more of the period's social context, *Summer in the City's* preface and conclusion put Mayor Lindsay's career and the state of the city from 1965 to 1973 into far more direct dialogue with its current state in 2015. Viteritti seems particularly interested in recovering Lindsay's reputation because doing so offers an alternative to the austerity-minded, law-and-order vision of the contemporary city: "More than any mayor since Fiorello LaGuardia," he says in the preface, "John Lindsay understood and fostered the civic project that has been lost as the city became absorbed in sustaining its fiscal solvency" (x). Former Lindsay budget director Charles R. Morris appears in both books, suggesting that financial issues continue to be a central concern in the history of this administration.

*Summer in the City* considers the ways that Lindsay diverges from the national norms of the period—first the liberalism of Johnson's Great Society, then the law-and-order reactivity of the Nixon administration. In his contextual introduction, Viteritti discusses the ways that civic projects of the Great Society were brought to cities through the Community Action Program, or CAP. This component of Johnson's War on Poverty required extensive participation of the city-dwellers it was meant to help, an admirable goal that short-circuited the usual relationship between the federal government, the city government, and the local institutions to whom funding was distributed (Viteritti 6–7). Lindsay recognized the moral obligations of government not because he was beholden to Johnson but precisely because he was a progressive Republican, one who "blended the seemingly antithetical impulses of elitism and populism" (Viteritti 38). Since Lindsay is so commonly associated with 1960s liberalism, both because of the Cannato biography and because his strain of Republicanism has mostly died

out, Geoffrey Kabaservice’s chapter “On Principle: A Progressive Republican” provides the most necessary reframing of Lindsay’s reputation.

Chapters Three through Five continue to position Lindsay in the national landscape, but they explain how the principles of a progressive Republican in the Johnson era clash so dramatically with the institutional norms of Robert Wagner’s City Hall and the broader city’s Democratic machine. Clarence Taylor’s chapter discusses the ways that Lindsay’s civil rights policies often had the effect of alienating the white ethnic unions upon whose power Robert Wagner depended. Charles Morris gives a broad history of the economic and demographic changes that the city underwent in the late 1960s, showing how Lindsay’s budget responded to factors beyond his control. David Rogers emphasizes the technocratic side to Lindsay’s good government philosophy. His chapter gives a thorough account of Lindsay’s use of management consultants to reorganize government agencies and streamline the process by which change could take place. Lindsay felt that well-trained outsiders, rather than those with the most comprehensive institutional memory, would be most able to cut through the bureaucratic red tape that had built up as a side effect of one-party rule. Not surprisingly, long-time civil servants were suspicious:

The old-liners wanted to run the agencies as they always had, with little analysis of the costs and benefits of different programs. They prided themselves on their long experience in city government and weren’t about to be displaced or made to change their work habits by young outsiders who regarded academic training in management and policy analysis as qualifying them to change the ways agencies were managed (Viteritti 115).

With this process of remaking organizations by importing fresh, enthusiastic experts without on-the-ground experience in the system they were reorganizing, it is clear that Lindsay’s process for getting things done anticipates many of the processes visited on American cities today, particularly in the education system.

Lindsay believed that academic expertise and enthusiasm could overcome the bureaucracy and inertia of the city government as it stood in 1965. Chapters Six through Eight discuss the relatively dramatic and uncontested impact of the Lindsay administration in city planning. In these chapters, we see how he pushes back against a figure more dominant in New York City than Richard Nixon or Lyndon Johnson or Robert Moses. Where Moses famously dictated the spatial changes in the city from the top down, Paul Goldberger’s chapter discusses how Lindsay tried to balance the centralized expertise of planners with the input of community members. Lizabeth Cohen and Brian Goldstein explore the increasing importance of public-private partnerships and city incentives to lure businesses to New York City and to keep them there. They discuss how “economic development became a realm of increasing importance” in an era when the loss of

manufacturing jobs and the containerization of shipping led to a dramatic loss in manual labor jobs while traffic congestion and crumbling infrastructure made the city less appealing for white-collar companies (Viteritti 164). This chapter and the Mariana Mogilevich one that follows consider the ways that deindustrialization led Lindsay to foster the business of arts and culture. As I discuss below, the strategies for reshaping city space in this period conceive of the city not as a place to work but a place to play, what James Sanders in *America's Mayor* calls an “adventure playground” (Roberts 84).

Most of these chapters are acutely interested in the local maneuvers of the Lindsay administration: zoning, project management, playground construction, and the like. The one major exception is Cohen and Goldstein’s chapter on economic development, which does discuss the movement of corporate headquarters from Manhattan to nearby states and the relocation of outer-borough factories to other regions of the U.S. This kind of focus is not surprising, both because of the authors’ areas of expertise and because many in the period claimed that Lindsay was just an ex-Congressman waiting to run for president. But neither the Viteritti nor the Roberts book considers the ways that Lindsay’s candidacy and administration takes place on a regional, national, and even an international stage. John Lindsay’s face appears on the cover of national magazines throughout *America's Mayor*; in the caption to one of the photographs, we are told that he is a “frequent guest on Johnny Carson’s ‘Tonight’ show, and that New York was often the butt of Carson’s jokes” (Robert 153). How does the image of New York City become constructed in the broader media landscape during Lindsay’s administration?

Stanley Corkin’s monograph *Starring New York* begins to answer this question, though he does so in a way that lacks some of the local grounding that Roberts and Viteritti provide. Though it includes some stellar close readings of films and a convincing reading of the nostalgic strain that runs from *Midnight Cowboy* to *Manhattan*, Corkin’s book can seem a bit agentless. In the films he analyzes, the spaces and relationships onscreen “situate viewers in a broader tale of anti-urbanism,” making the forces of gentrification, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism appear to be natural correctives to the immoral, fragmented, and dangerous city (Corkin 8). Corkin analyzes some two-dozen films from the 1970s whose *mise-en-scène* and story evoke New York City as a place. Over the course of the decade, he sees the films morph in their representations of urban space and mobility; these changing images, he argues, both record and help to reinforce the changing economic conditions of the post-industrial city. Corkin’s introduction establishes the context in which these auteurist films were made, including the changing role of the independent producer within the studio system, the move to lighter and more flexible camera technologies, and the Lindsay administration’s opening up of the process for obtaining location shooting permits.

In *Starring New York*, Corkin discusses the ways that these films created new “cognitive maps” of the city, borrowing from Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City*.<sup>7</sup> Corkin incorporates the work of several politically-minded spatial

theorists and cultural geographers, but his notion of the changing role of the city in late capitalism seems most directly derived from the work of Neil Brenner, who sees cities like New York playing an outsized role in the globalization process, reconfiguring the scale of political power among city, state, and nation. These newly distorted ideas of scale and interrelation between the individual and the group make their way into social relations as well. Instead of participatory government serving as the model for an individual’s integration into the broader community—through family, local community, and state government—we are now thinking about the individual and the global economy with no measures of broader community support in between. It is the marketplace that models the ideal forms of social relation, and indeed of self.

In Corkin’s discussion of New York-centered films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Prince of the City* (1981), he considers the visual representation of local space, the ways that space does or does not connect with other spaces, and the kinds of economic and social possibilities that arise from these spatial arrangements. He builds upon Henri Lefebvre’s concepts of centripetal and centrifugal space, applied to earlier *films noir* by Edward Dimendberg. Centripetal space “looks inward and seems isolated from that which is not defined as part of it,” while centrifugal space “spiral[s] outward to gesture and affix to the world beyond” (9). The first types of films, covered in Chapters Two through Four, can be roughly understood as centripetal ones: they present mostly marginal characters living in insular neighborhoods with limited economic opportunities. We see a more centrifugally oriented spatiality in the films discussed in Chapters Five and Six, where the narratives move between New York neighborhoods and other regions and nations, integrating the city into the global flows of capital. The final chapter brings these two movements together, showing how characters of an insular neighborhood (the Upper East Side) nevertheless can call upon the cultural capital available to them in the newly networked world.

Keeping Corkin’s critical perspective in mind, I will conclude with some of the issues raised in these three books that suggest other forms of spatial reorganization of New York City in the Lindsay era. Lindsay’s major policy initiatives and management techniques highlight the processes of centralization and decentralization in local government of the period. His walks in minority neighborhoods, mentioned throughout *America’s Mayor*, emphasize the importance of physical presence and even vulnerability as a political strategy. And finally, Lindsay’s insistence on the importance of art in everyday life leads to a new and more spectacular relation to city space overall. These new ways of envisioning city space all have roots in Lindsay’s 1965 campaign; instead of presenting ways to fix the city in crisis, they offer new ways to move through it.

While many critics in these volumes emphasize the decentralization at work in Lindsay’s government, I feel it is important to understand the impulse in tension with the simultaneous desire for centralized (and often technologically mediated) governmental expertise. Lindsay’s administration focused on establishing clear ways of moving through government channels as a way of setting themselves

in opposition to the Democratic machine that preceded them. “New York City in Crisis” suggested that the city government was an unmanageable labyrinth, one that only a supercomputer could figure out:

One Planning Commission Specialist has come up with a novel suggestion that is guaranteed never to see the light of day under the present city administration. “The city needs a lot of things but I’d like to use an IBM machine to figure out some chain of command for how to go about getting something done in the city,” he says. “Then you’d know exactly where the power was and exactly where to go to get something accomplished.”<sup>8</sup>

Though this quote appeared before Lindsay ran, it reflected a broader desire for technological solutions to bureaucratic and institutional problems. This technocratic approach extended into many different departments at City Hall, but most prominently the police department. According to Nicholas Pileggi’s “Crime and Punishment” article, Lindsay demanded accurate crime statistics and instituted computerized 911 call dispatching (Roberts 80).

Paul Golderberger’s chapter in *Summer in the City* identifies an important moment in the 1965 campaign, a “helicopter tour of the city” when John Lindsay’s ideas about urban development crystallized (Viteritti 140). In urban planning, as in the rest of his administration, Lindsay imagined the administration’s role as seeing that big picture, while the community’s role was talking about how things worked and did not work on the local level. They centralized expertise and decentralized community feedback. Lindsay saw planning—both the management of projects and spaces—as a means of creating clearer and more pleasant paths through the city.

This model was implemented in Lindsay’s campaign. He opened more than 120 local campaign offices in neighborhoods across the boroughs, staffed with enthusiastic Young Republican volunteers. As with Barack Obama’s election in 2008, Lindsay’s election was dependent upon the creation of a broad and flexible campaign infrastructure, one that could respond to the concerns of local populations. He continued to spread channels for communication throughout the city with his creation of “Little City Halls,” local community centers where constituents could share their problems and know that they would be shared with the mayor’s office. “His Little City Halls were not simply another way of building a network of predictable middle-class sources,” says Pete Hammill in his “Power to the Rest of the People” chapter; “Those urban consulates were also charged with opening contact among non-conventional groups, including militants, gang leaders, sports groups. They were a big city version of an early warning system” (Roberts 69). But listening to new voices often comes at the expense of groups who had been the “predictable middle-class sources” of the past, especially unions. Lindsay’s most controversial proposals—such as civilian review of complaints against the police force, community-controlled



school boards, and scatter-site public housing—were rejected by people who felt decentralization meant the redistribution of power away from them. In this era of regular protests that “black lives matter,” one of the issues that Lindsay’s election highlights is just how long this lack of police accountability has been an issue in city governments.

As with most politicians, Lindsay is remembered more for his personal interventions than his institutional ones. Charlayne Hunter-Gault remarks that, “Lindsay also went to the people, a familiar figure in shirtsleeves, walking the sometimes mean streets of black and Hispanic neighborhoods, talking to the people who lived there” (Roberts 47). The mayor’s walking tours earned the respect of community activists. It also established his credibility in advance of his most famous walk through Harlem, which took place the night that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Lindsay offered Harlem residents a sense of immediacy and emotional engagement when the majority of the city’s spatial politics were organized to distance and dehumanize them. Corkin discusses the ways that establishing shots in blaxploitation films tend to do the latter, since they “provide high-angle shots of Harlem . . . designed to aggregate and objectify African American humans and their associated space” (80). Though Lindsay views the urban landscape from overhead for the purposes of planning, he engages with minority constituents at street-level, as an equal in the crowd. Indeed, one of the issues I had with Corkin’s spatial framework had to do with the absence of a positive street-level model for engaging with the city. When he brings up the Harlem helicopter shots, he discusses their distancing point of view in relation to Michel de Certeau’s famous chapter in “The Practice of Everyday Life” that begins at the top of the World Trade Center. But that chapter is called “Walking in the City,” and it discusses the ways that moving through the city produces a different kind of knowledge than the “totalizing” and disembodied view from above.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, I would argue that the most important totalizing vision of city space in Lindsay’s New York City is the idea of urban space as a spectacle. It is specifically in the Lindsay era that the government begins to imagine art and film as engines driving city economies no longer fueled by manufacturing and middle-class tax dollars. This too begins during his mayoral campaign: “As a candidate in 1965, Lindsay promised to streamline the cumbersome bureaucratic process of obtaining the permits necessary to shoot films in New York City” (Corkin 6). The creation of the Mayor’s Office of Film, Theater, and Broadcasting in 1966 codifies into city policy the move away from understanding urban centers as manufacturing centers and toward understanding them as nodes in the production and consumption of information and entertainment.

The Parks Department, the Office of Cultural Affairs, and other city offices all supported events that present the city as what James Sanders dubs an “adventure playground” (Roberts 84). Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving planned a huge number of open-ended, playful events in Central Park that were dubbed “happenings,” after the avant-garde participatory performances planned by Al-

lan Kaprow. The city's public art events collapsed the distinction between art and everyday life in much the same way Kaprow desired. Mariana Mogilevich discusses the ways that the Parks Department's "mobile units" put this ideal into practice, bringing jazz, film, arts and crafts, and theater to minority and outer-borough neighborhoods (Viteritti 205). Indeed, Lindsay's New York City saw an overall "cultural decentralization" (Viteritti 207); instead of presenting all of its artifacts and performances in a central museum district, New York began funding new museum and art spaces throughout the city. That decentralization, like the economic and political ones described throughout the two edited collections, redistributes cultural capital within the city space.

*America's Mayor* and *Summer in the City* reframe the debates about John Lindsay and New York by moving away from the assumption, implicit in Vincent Cannato's title, that the city in the 1960s and 1970s was ungovernable. Instead, both edited collections make the case for some of Lindsay's successes and contextualize his difficulties. The texts are fairly detailed and locally-oriented: while they might be useful in a class about the 1970s or one that explores different modes of city governance, they are going to be most useful to scholars of New York City across disciplines. I wish that Stanley Corkin had these new takes at his disposal when writing his monograph *Starring New York*. His local history comes pretty directly from Cannato and so it lacks the nuance and contemporaneity that is especially present in the Viteritti edited collection. Similarly, when reading Roberts and Viteritti, I missed the aesthetic and narrative understanding of space that Corkin brought to his argument. Cultural images of New York City always mediate our view of everyday life in the city, and it is up to urban studies scholars to develop a more complex vocabulary for discussing the interplay between the two.

1965 was a turning point in how Americans understand their cities. We might consider a number of signal events from that year: the Northeast Blackout on November 9, for example, shows how the urban infrastructure of the period was tied to regional and international networks. The three recent books reviewed here raise intriguing questions about the resonance of these earlier political and cultural changes in present-day New York City, particularly in the wake of the financial collapse of 2008 and the continuing criticism of the police force. It might be easy to see how TV shows like *Sex and the City* extend "the Lindsay-era impulse" identified by James Sanders "to regard the city's urban landscape as, in some real sense, a giant outdoor stage" (Roberts 101). This impulse seems at least somewhat different in more contemporary shows like *Girls*, *Broad City*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*; though they are all playful and include a number of scenes shot on location, they also communicate a more pronounced sense of the city's inequality and lack of permanent jobs. These books offer us a starting point for thinking about the root causes of the current "city in crisis."

## Notes

1. Barry Gottehrer, *New York City in Crisis* (New York: David McKay, 1965): 194.
2. *New York City in Crisis*, 204.
3. *New York City in Crisis*, 204.
4. George F. Will, “Looking Back to 1965,” *The Public Interest*, Fall 1995: 3.
5. Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable: John Lindsay and his Struggle to Save New York City* (New York: Basic Books, 2001): ix.
6. Vincent J. Cannato, “Vincent Cannato: The Return of the 1970s in New York,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2013, sec. Opinion; Joshua Freeman, “De Blasio’s New York,” *Dissent* 62, no. 1 (2015): 29–35.
7. Fredric Jameson has usefully reimagined Lynch’s cognitive mapping a means of thinking about how the individual can orient herself in relation to the expansive interconnectedness of globalized, postmodern space. See *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 51.
8. *New York City in Crisis*, 199.
9. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1988), 92–93.





Mark Hulsether blends in with some unidentified historical or mythic figures, possibly sages on the way to Bethlehem around the beginning of the common era.