

## REVANCHIST CITY

“The rallying cry of the revanchist city might well be: ‘Who lost the city? And on whom is revenge to be exacted?’”

Neil Smith, 1996, p.227

In order to understand what is meant by the “revanchist city”, it is instructive to look back to the birthplace of revanchism: late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. Revanchists (from the French word *revanche*, meaning revenge) were a group of bourgeois nationalist reactionaries opposed to the liberalism of the Second Republic, the decadence of the monarchy, and especially the socialist uprising of the Paris Commune, where the working-classes took over from the defeated government of Napoleon III and controlled the city for months. The revanchists (led by poet-turned-soldier Paul Deroulede and the Ligue des Patriotes) were determined to reinstate the bourgeois order with a strategy that fused militarism and moralism with claims about restoring public order on the streets. They hunted down enemies (the Communards) with a noxious blend of hatred and viciousness, intent on exacting revenge upon all those who had ‘stolen’ their vision of French society from them.

In the 1990s, urban geographer Neil Smith identified a striking similarity between the revanchism of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and the political climate of late 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City that emerged to fill the vacuum left by the disintegration of liberal urban policy. He coined the concept of the *revanchist city* to capture the disturbing urban condition created by a seismic political shift: whereas the liberal era of the post-1960s period was characterised by redistributive policy, affirmative action and anti-poverty legislation, the era of *neoliberal* revanchism was characterised by a discourse

of revenge against minorities, the working class, feminists, environmental activists, gays and lesbians, and recent immigrants: the ‘public enemies’ of the bourgeois political elite and their supporters. New York City in the 1990s became an arena for concerted attacks on affirmative action and immigration policy, street violence against gays and homeless people, feminist-bashing and public campaigns against political correctness and multiculturalism. Just as the bourgeois order was perceived as under threat by the revanchists of 1890s Paris, in 1990s New York a particular, exclusionary vision of ‘civil society’ was being reinstated with a vengeance – an attempt to banish those not part of that vision to the urban periphery.

According to Smith, two important factors fuelled the fire of revanchist New York City. First, the economic recession of the late 1980s/early 1990s (which triggered unprecedented anger amongst the white middle-classes; marginalised populations of the city soon became scapegoats, the supposed source of urban unease); and second, (re)productions of paranoia and fear by the media that amplified and aggravated extant sentiments among swathes of middle-class voters seeking to affix blame for their perceived lack of safety in urban public spaces. It came as no surprise to many that, in 1993, Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor on the promise to offer a better “quality of life” for “conventional members of society”. Smith pointed out that revanchism under Giuliani was sharpened by blaming the failures of earlier liberal policy on the marginalized populations such policy was supposed to assist. Giuliani identified homeless people, panhandlers, prostitutes, squeegee cleaners, squatters, graffiti artists, reckless bicyclists, and unruly youth as the major threats to urban order and the culprits of urban decay. A particularly repressive attitude towards these ‘culprits’, as exemplified by the well-publicised ‘zero tolerance’ policies of the New

York Police Department under Giuliani's administration, can perhaps be taken as the hallmark of the revanchist city. As the city's economy recovered in the mid-1990s, the crime rate dropped further (contrary to popular perception, it had been falling *before* Giuliani's tenure), public spaces such as Times Square and Bryant Park were privatised and commodified, New York City became a major tourist destination, and gentrification accelerated and diffused into neighbourhoods bypassed by previous waves of the process. The fanfare of success attributed to a charismatic mayor squashed concerns over those who had to be swept away and/or incarcerated to allow these changes to take place.

In the United States, revanchism goes much further than political ideology and moral crusade – it has worked its way into municipal legislation. Laws against begging, panhandling, sleeping or urinating on sidewalks and in other public spaces are increasingly used to cleanse the public spaces used by tourists, the middle-class and wealthy residents and visitors. As cities compete aggressively to make themselves attractive places to live in and in which to invest, they are more willing to impose harsh penalties on those people seen as 'undesirable' by tourists, shoppers, commuters, and investors. Municipal ordinances have been mobilized to criminalize behavior that is offensive or unpleasant to the resident and visiting middle classes. Furthermore, the punitive strategies to deal with 'unruly' citizens are usually put forward by their architects as common-sense, a *fait accompli*, even sacrosanct.

Smith's revanchist city thesis has proved to be one of the more influential in urban studies in recent years. He stated that revanchism was not something unique to New York or American cities, but something common to the restructured urban geography

of the late capitalist city. This invited other researchers to take up the issue of the applicability of revanchism to other urban contexts. MacLeod (2002) traced the extent to which revanchism has permeated the recent 'renaissance' of central Glasgow, Scotland, and argued that the dismissive treatment of Glasgow's homeless during its 1990s economic recovery suggests that the city bore the imprints of an emerging politics of revanchism, but stopped short of saying that fully-fledged revanchism is present there (due to the existence of a range of policy schemes designed to assist marginalized populations in that city). Atkinson (2003) argued that certain strands of revanchism have infiltrated urban policies addressing control and safety in Britain's public spaces, even if outright vengeance was hard to detect. Uitermark and Duyvendak (2008) found that the revanchism of populist parties in Rotterdam, Netherlands, was qualitatively different to the revanchism identified by Smith. It was directed in large part to ethnic minorities and especially Muslims (an attempt to discipline marginalised ethnic groups), and most supporters of revanchism were among the lower classes. Finally, recent scholarship on cities of the Global South has detected extreme forms of revanchism occurring in Quito, Ecuador (Swanson, 2008) and Mumbai, India (Whitehead and More, 2007), as city managers (under pressure from elite urbanites and business leaders) attempt to sweep the symptoms of poverty and homelessness out of sight.

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See also: Displacement, Exclusionary Zoning, Gentrification, Governance, Homeless, New York City, Paris, Social Exclusion, Surveillance, Urban Policy.

## Further Readings

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