2022

Building Home in Diaspora: New York's Jewish Left and the History of the Bronx Housing Cooperatives

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An Honors Paper for the Department of History

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Bowdoin College, 2022

For Theo

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the generosity, care, and, of course, labor, of more people than I can count. I am grateful for the Paul Nyhus Travel Grant and the Grua/O'Connell Research Grant, which provided the funds to travel to archives for valuable materials and have necessary documents translated. I'd first like to thank Professor Rachel Sturman for seeing in me the potential to take on the challenge of an Honors project and encouraging me to dive into the possibility and uncertainty head-on from the very beginning. I'd also like to thank Professor Jill Pearlman, whose contagious love of cities inspired the kernel of this project last Spring. I'm grateful to you both for agreeing to join me on this year-long journey as members of my committee, and for your ongoing and always-constructive feedback. Thank you for challenging me to wade in complexity. I would also like to thank Professor Salar Mohandesi, whose first-year seminar set me on the track to study History, and whose engaged, rigorous, and radical teaching expanded my conception of the possibilities of this discipline. Likewise, I am grateful to Professor Marilyn Reizbaum, who nurtured my interest in Jewish diasporas, and whose office – and occasionally the picnic table at Dogbar Jim – became my own Jew*ish* home here in Brunswick.

I would not have come to this project without the inspiration and invaluable research assistance of my dear cousin, Jennifer Young. Thanks to your dedication in life and work uplifting the history of radical Jews, I realized that this subject could constitute more than a personal passion, but a serious scholarly study. I owe sincere thanks to Dr. Steven Payne of the Bronx County Historical Society, who not only offered invaluable insights about the cooperatives, but who also gave me a crash course in archival research when I arrived in the Bronx with minimal experience. Thank you for letting me camp out in your research library during that brutally hot June week and for your ongoing generosity answering my questions throughout the process. Your personal commitment to this research has affirmed to me the importance of local history. I'm grateful as well to Hallel Yadin at the YIVO institute for scanning hundreds of pages of Yiddish meeting minutes, and to Sandra Chiritescu of Columbia University for your invaluable help translating these documents for me.

I extend deep thanks to my parents, Shelley Gross and Randy Wilson, and to my dear friend, Jacob Hunter, all of whom let me talk through these ideas with them at length, and who came to the rescue hours before submissions to provide comments on my drafts. As the residents of the Bronx cooperatives knew well, this project underscored the importance of community care to any successful endeavor. For this I must also thank my own little cooperative: my dear friends and roommates Livia Kunins-Berkowitz, Emma Dewey, and Sebastian de Lasa. Thank you for the meals, the laughs, and the dancing that nourished this project. Building home with you inspired *Building Home in Diaspora*.

And, of course, I am forever grateful to my hardy thesis team that made this project possible: to Reuben Schafir, whose poise and positivity made a challenging project seem achievable; to Livia Kunins-Berkowitz, my ingenious interlocutor, whose shared passion for Jewish diasporic futures is felt throughout this project, and whose care and encouragement helped me move with grace through a trying process. Finally, I extend my deepest thanks to my advisor, Professor David Hecht, who graciously and trustingly agreed to take on my project. Thank you for not only offering me wise and constructive feedback for this topic on which we were both relatively unschooled, but for doing so with the utmost compassion. Your office was a warm and welcoming space to work through the ideas that became this thesis.

Introduction
A Jewish Worker's Vacation

"There has been a revolution on the Lower East Side," announced the journalist Michael Gold to readers of *The Nation* in September, 1926. The sweatshops that once scarred the Lower East Side's streets as symbols of "proletarian degradation" had produced what quickly became the unofficial capital of a robust Jewish labor movement. Militant and well-organized, the neighborhood's half-million Jewish garment workers who had only recently toiled 18-hour days for a mere $12/week now averaged better wages than school teachers. They now supplemented bread-and-herring diets with the intellectual nourishment of a rich mass culture of Yiddish literature and drama. Yet this was no revolution like that of the Bolsheviks nearly a decade prior. There was no armed conflict or revolutionary vanguard, but this is not what made Jewish New York's revolution unique. For Gold, the revolution Jewish workers' had incited was perhaps less concerned with dramatic changes to the Lower East Side than with Jewish workers' ability to leave the neighborhood altogether. "Their revolution has taught them to be their own saviors," he explained. "Among other things, they now take vacations."[1]

Born in 1893 in the Lower East Side's squalid tenements to Jewish immigrant parents from Hungary and Romania, Gold knew this better than anyone. At age twelve he was forced to drop out of school to help his parents make ends meet. He recalled his mother longing incessantly for the countryside, his father reminiscing about "sweet, slow peasant life." To Gold's excitement, by 1926, Jewish workers had organized a handful of summer camps tucked in the rolling hills of the Hudson valley to help quench that widespread longing to flee their cramped neighborhood. For no more than $15/week, the wage earner:

[1] Michael Gold, "At a Workers' Vacation Camp," *The Nation*, September 29, 1926, 294.

> can sleep. He can roam the hills. He can sing in the moonlight. He can swim, take sun-baths, listen to lectures, sing in the mass chorals, act in proletarian comedies, read in the library, talk, laugh, play games, go about all day in nothing but bathing trunks…[2]

At Camp Nitgedaiget—'*No Worries*' in Yiddish—Jewish workers (and specifically *not* bosses), were not only free from their oppressive jobs, but also free from their oppressive neighborhood.

If revolution meant decamping from the Lower East Side for rural community, Jewish culture, and proletarian politics, another burgeoning movement was bringing these values to the outskirts of the city—this time promising a more permanent solution than vacation. As *The Nation* hastily reported the following week, the same upstart Jewish wage-earners organizing trips to the Hudson valley now called themselves the United Workers Cooperative Association and were in the midst of building a 5-story apartment complex covering an entire city block near the North side of Bronx Park.[3] They weren't the only ones: members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America were preparing to break ground on an identical apartment complex just across the Bronx River, while members of a Yiddishist cultural movement had already begun construction on a similar complex just down the street by the Jerome Park Reservoir.

Like the summer camps before them, the three houses were replete with educational programs and libraries, weekly lectures and clubs, daycare facilities and art studios. They boasted auditoriums to host Yiddish theater troupes, gymnasiums for community athletics, and their unique garden apartment architecture offered residents greenspace and natural light their tenements could not match. Perhaps most appealing, however, was the location: just off the northernmost subway stop in the Bronx, about as far from the Lower East Side as they could be and remain within city limits, all three houses sat perched within walking distance of the borough's vast parklands, providing fresh air and spaciousness unfamiliar downtown. Today's

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[2] Gold, "Workers' Vacation," 295.
[3] James Rorty, "The Workers Build Their Own," *The Nation*, October 6, 1926, 322.

readers might share the sentiments of the 1926 journalist: "It sounds like Florida. It sounds too good to be true."[4] How was it that, seemingly overnight, thousands of Jewish workers could trade in their cramped tenements for spacious garden apartments? The short answer: Cooperative Housing.

By the early 1910s, a growing contingent of the American labor movement was drawing inspiration from an economic philosophy originally pioneered in 1844 by a collective of weavers in fast-industrializing Rochdale, England (or so the myth goes).[5] These "Rochdale Principles," inspired in part by Robert Owens' industrial utopianism, advanced a cooperative production scheme in which workers shared profits and democratically controlled the firm's decisions by way of vote. The values of self-help and worker control quickly expanded beyond textiles, guiding the establishment of consumer and housing cooperatives from Spain to Scandinavia.[6] In particular, the city of Vienna innovated a large-scale municipal experiment in cooperative housing just years before the Bronx cooperatives took off. Such boundary-pushing principles found a welcome home amongst the Jewish labor milieu of New York City's postwar housing shortage. Where the vast, primarily Yiddish-speaking Jewish labor movement leveraged considerable power on the shop floor, there remained few outlets to address their blighted living conditions.[7] Landlords were accused of widespread price-gouging and few legal mechanisms gave tenants the power to organize.[8] Relying on generous loans from the Yiddish press and the relatively cheap cost of land in the North Bronx, the cooperative model allowed Jewish workers

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[4] Rorty, "Workers," 323.
[5] Brett Fairbairn, *The Meaning of Rochdale: The Rochdale Pioneers and the Co-Operative Principles*, Occasional Paper Series, 94.02 (Saskatoon, Sask., Canada: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, 1994), 2.
[6] E. G. Nourse, "The Economic Philosophy of Co-Operation," *The American Economic Review* 12, no. 4 (1922): 578.
[7] Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2009) 8-13.
[8] Robert M. Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.

to pool their resources towards collective ownership, sidestepping speculation to create apartments that dwarfed the conditions of their Lower East Side tenements.

Beyond such common benefits, the three cooperatives represented distinct perspectives on Jewish political and cultural life. As the journalist Calvin Trillin wrote in 1977, "in the late twenties, a Jewish garment worker who wanted to move his family from the squalor of the Lower East Side to the relatively sylvan North Bronx could select an apartment on the basis of ideology."[9] The Amalgamated represented the social democratic wing of the Jewish labor movement, its founder, Abraham Kazan, attempting to secure unionism as a way of life. The Sholem Aleichem housed the Yiddishists—socialist artists and intellectuals concerned with uplifting the language and culture they had carried over from the Pale of Settlement. Meanwhile, the United Workers Cooperative Colony—which went by 'the Coops' (pronounced like stoops)––drew its ranks primarily from Jewish Communists seeking a home base from which to organize towards a revolution they deemed imminent. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Bronx housing cooperatives, more than experiments in communal living, were the site of a highly contested battle over competing Jewish cultural and political worldviews.

Although they would appear to have represented a microcosm of New York's Jewish left wing, the Bronx cooperatives have received scant mention in histories of the movement. For scholars like Tony Michels, whose impressive book *A Fire in Their Hearts* covers the rise and fall of New York's Yiddish-speaking labor movement, the revolution of the Lower East Side was precisely that—a revolution contained to the Lower East Side. Michels concludes his study in the early 1920s, with spikes in anti-semitism and political repression ushering in what he calls the movement's "decade of retrenchment," tethering him geographically to the Lower East Side and

[9] Calvin Trillin, "The Coops," The New Yorker, 1977.

allowing the era of the Bronx cooperatives only a small mention.[10] Yet as Deborah Dash Moore points out, while by the 1920s Jews made a mass exodus from the heart of Lower Manhattan, they fashioned "Jewish ethnic alternatives to the Lower East Side" on the city's fringes, from Brownsville, Brooklyn to the Bronx.[11] And while the trends Michels identifies are undeniable, his scope obscures the various ways radical Jews attempted to maintain and negotiate their various worldviews against the backdrop of these and other evolving challenges. How did Jewish workers translate their political cultures from the Lower East Side to improve increasingly unsatisfactory living conditions? How did they navigate the contradictions of living in anti-capitalist projects in a capitalist market? Or maintain Jewish culture in increasingly assimilated communities? What would it mean if, as Gold suggested, the revolution of the Lower East Side was also a revolution of the Bronx?

The history of the Bronx cooperatives provokes relevant questions at the intersection of Jewish studies and urban history, yet scholarship on the topic remains limited. In their accounts of affordable housing in New York, urban historians Nicholas Bloom and Richard Plunz have focused on the architectural innovations of the cooperatives' unique garden apartments, and their legacy as subsidized housing pioneers.[12] Consequently, their attention privileges the Amalgamated, the only cooperative of the three to outlast the Depression in its original cooperative structure, and which benefited from an auspicious 1926 state housing law that drew public attention to the project. The house's relative elevation amongst the cooperatives can also

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[10] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 254.
[11] Deborah Dash Moore, "On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in Three Boroughs," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 252.
[12] Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner, eds., *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies That Transformed a City* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, (Columbia University Press, 2018).

be credited to the celebrated legacy its founder, Abraham Kazan, would proceed to enjoy; Kazan went on to sponsor enormous cooperative projects well into the 1960s including the infamous Co-op City. Regrettably, urban histories of New York that do not entirely obscure the Bronx cooperatives or singularly uphold the Amalgamated tend to collapse the political and cultural differences between the three cooperatives, framing them as part of a unified Jewish Left that never truly was.

From the perspective of Jewish studies, cursory mentions of the Bronx cooperatives can be found across prominent works on the Jewish labor movement, from Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism* to Tony Michels' aforementioned *A Fire in Their Hearts*. In addition to omitting the cooperative era, works like Michels' also tend to present Jewish New York's political debates as they played out in theory: on the pages of the Yiddish press, through speeches and lectures. While Michels' approach offers an unparalleled analysis of the ideological currents that made up this diverse movement, at times it can feel removed from the experiences of the Jewish workers themselves who gave life to these ideas. This thesis attempts to build on Michels' contribution by grounding these fierce ideological debates in the everyday lives of the Bronx cooperators—in the inevitable challenges and possibilities of putting these politics into practice.

By investigating the story of this relatively small movement in both urban history and Jewish history, this thesis simultaneously zooms in and out, narrowing its geographic scope in order to expand the temporal and theoretical. To this end, I draw methodological inspiration from recent works of urban social history such as Kelly Lytle Hernandez's *City of Inmates,* which traces Los Angeles' settler colonial history from its first Spanish prison to its present reputation as the US carceral capital. Hernandez's narrow geographic scope challenges her to expand her

source base beyond the scarce institutional records that dominate traditional histories, and instead toward what she calls the "Rebel Archive," the evidence left by dissident or incarcerated "journalists, musicians, migrants, mothers," providing a perspective that refuses the legibility of authoritative narratives.[13]

Likewise, the central narrative of this thesis gravitates around a few square miles in the North Bronx during two critical decades (1930s-1940s) in the cooperatives' history, covered principally in Chapter 2. Yet doing so requires looking "upriver," as Hernandez does in LA, back to the Lower East Side of the 1880s, when the first major wave of Russian Jews arrived and infused the city's burgeoning labor movement with Yiddish culture. For this is where they developed the vigorous political commitments and experienced the devastating living conditions that together drove them en masse to the Bronx by the late 1920s. While there is not exactly a comparable "rebel archive" within the cooperatives' history, I took Hernandez's challenge to expand my source base beyond the most readily available documentation, which, as both a cause and an effect of the Amalgamated's elevated reception, tends to privilege this house's story. This meant unearthing and translating[14] scribbled Yiddish meeting minutes from the early days of the Sholem Aleichem, preserved by the YIVO institute. It also meant drawing copiously from the valuable cache of oral histories conducted with former residents of both the Sholem Aleichem and the Coops, housed respectively at the Yiddish Book Center and the Bronx County Historical Society. These sources complemented the well-documented history of the Amalgamated by opening up a world of resident perspectives from its neighboring cooperatives whose history has been largely unpreserved—deliberately, in the case of the Coops's Cold War era fears, and more

[13] Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[14] With the generous help of Sandra Chiritescu of Columbia University.

passively in the case of the waning interest in Yiddish preservation at the Sholem Aleichem. This thesis works from the premise that the specificity of place-based histories opens up radical archival possibilities.

My first chapter thus begins where most histories of the Jewish Left do: the Lower East Side at the turn of the 20th century. In an attempt to address the vacuum of scholarship on the cooperatives I ask, *Why must the Bronx cooperatives be central to any study of the Jewish labor movement? And what do these stories add that other studies omit?* Synthesizing Tony Michels' insightful work on Jewish socialism with essays from scholars of the Yiddish Left such as Paul Buhle and Isaiah Trunk, this chapter identifies two defining characteristics of the Jewish Left: the interrelationship between working class politics and culture, and the diverse field of competing political ideologies within it. From mutual aid societies to labor education, Yiddish theater to political choruses, the Jewish labor movement wove together politics and culture across every sphere of life. Through these activities, its members debated questions of assimilation and nationalism, socialism and communism. If, as scholars compellingly suggest, the movement's intimate relationship between culture and politics and its ideological diversity were crucial to its history, than this period of explosive cooperative development, rather than a moment of necessary decline, can be seen as a radical opening: an era in which this innovative urban technology offered a new and creative vehicle through which to study, strike, play, sing, dance, cook, care, and live collectively—in ways both old and new. By the 1920s, Jewish workers viewed housing as a sort of final political frontier—an area of life that was both desperately failing to meet their current needs, but also one that represented abundant possibility for expanding their rich political cultures.

After establishing "cooperative foundations," chapter two confronts the scarce yet persistent narratives that dominate studies of the Bronx cooperatives, scholarly and otherwise. This chapter attempts to challenge the popular "success story" of the Amalgamated, which assumes the priority of financial success and material longevity when evaluating their relative historical value. Instead, I interrogate the values underlying the "hardiness" that enabled the Amalgamated to survive all these years, situating it as but one of multiple interpretations as to the housing cooperative's function. I compare the three cooperatives by considering the way the houses each negotiated a common set of contradictions that inevitably challenged their political ideologies: *How could they build and sustain a cooperative driven by anti-capitalist values in a capitalist market? And how did they reconcile commitments to Jewish cooperative community and universalist labor politics?* Where the Amalgamated prioritized financial success in this alleged bind between politics and economics, the Sholem Aleichem, despite—or perhaps because of—early financial failures, attempted to circumvent this bind by staging a massive rent strike, combining their cooperative foundations with a newfound tenant militancy. In the apparent tension between cooperative community and outside politics, where the Amalgamated's founders attempted to enforce the priority of their own cooperative community, the Coops rejected this bind altogether by fusing community building with political organizing.

Despite these persistent challenges made clear from the documentary record, more recent reminiscences on these early days from former cooperators tend to paint a more nostalgic picture. Relying on oral histories and memorial journals from the 1970s through the present, chapter three draws from theorist Svetlana Boym to consider what former cooperators' nostalgic reminiscences might reveal or obscure about the past and the present. *What might residents' nostalgia tell us about the historical shifts that have since made this kind of living experiment*

impossible? What might their nostalgia conceal about the exclusionary nature of the cooperatives from the beginning? I consider how nostalgic reminiscences about the sheer diversity of Jewish Left ideologies might reflect the ideological impacts of the Cold War and Neoliberalism on Left political possibility in the present. At the same time, I consider how nostalgia might conceal the ever-present relationship between the cooperative movement and racist urban renewal slum-clearance projects, along with the racist exclusion embedded in the Coops, despite its early racial integration as early as the 1930s.

Perhaps now more than ever, the possibilities and contradictions raised by the Bronx cooperators offer relevant insights to contemporary struggles. Over the last few decades, the American Left has witnessed a mass resurgence, first catalyzed by the Occupy movement's response to growing wealth inequality, and broadened by Bernie Sanders' historic grassroots presidential bid in 2016. More recently, the intersecting crises of racist police violence, climate catastrophe, and housing insecurity—the extent of which were all laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic—have yielded a renewed culture of mass protest. The last few years have also seen some of the largest strike waves in recent history, from tenants to teachers. These movements have undoubtedly produced tangible, if temporary, gains for the country's most marginalized. Yet the process of reawakening to the power of mass action from the depths of the neoliberal consensus of the 1980s-2000s has left movements flailing, scrambling for strategies to sustain themselves. Indeed, recent waves of organizing are widely characterized by cultures of burnout.[15]

[15] Christianna Silva, "Black Activist Burnout: 'You Can't Do This Work If You're Running On Empty,'" *NPR*, August 10, 2020, sec. Being Black In America; John Eligon, "They Push. They Protest. And Many Activists, Privately, Suffer as a Result.," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2018, sec. U.S.; Marie Solis, "When Dismantling Power Dismantles You Instead," *Vice*, December 7, 2018.

Movement histories have always been plagued by struggles to maintain continuity. If anything, this thesis demonstrate that the Bronx cooperatives were no exception. But Jewish New Yorkers proved that it was possible—and perhaps critical—to demand more from politics than doctrine and discipline. Politics could encapsulate a wide range of needs and desires, from singing and dancing to striking and studying. How might political movements expand the realm of what is politically possible? For the Bronx cooperators, politics was always also about forging community, of building a home in diaspora.

Chapter One
Building Cooperative Foundations

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times

– Bertolt Brecht
"Motto to *Svendborg Poems"* (1939)

Selling Rooms to Radicals

If you were a Jewish worker in mid-1920s New York, the first you would have heard of the Bronx cooperatives would likely have been from the left-wing press. In both Yiddish and English, by 1926 whispers of modern, worker-owned housing began circulating in the pages of the *Forward*, the *Morgen Freiheit*, and the *Daily Worker*, before eventually reaching more mainstream outlets. Articles and market listings promoting the cooperatives set them in stark relief against the crowded, overpriced tenements typical of most worker housing at the time. An article from the *Daily Worker* on the construction of the Coops mentions "the rooms are large and airy—many of them facing Bronx Park, something quite unusual for workers' dwellings."[1] Soon after the construction of the Amalgamated Houses a year later, the *Forward* contrasted photographs of a shadowy, deserted "old-style" East Side tenement against the newly-built cooperative's grand neo-tudor exterior and its spacious, bustling courtyard—"Where workers families used to live and where they can live now," the caption reads.[2] Workers could exchange these old world tenements for apartments "with the most modern improvements," and for a "reasonable" rate, at that. Listings compared the average rent of a cooperative apartment at

[1] M. Rosenberg, "Workers Move Into Cooperative House in New York Soon," *The Daily Worker*, November 25, 1926, New York edition.
[2] "Where Workers Families Used to Live and Where They Live Now," *The Forward*, December 25, 1927.

$11/room against $20 for comparable rentals.[3] The left-wing press represented the Bronx cooperatives as a financially innovative path for workers to become modern urban dwellers.

Yet this was not the "modern" of mainstream American culture. Beyond their appeals to workers' material ambitions, articles and advertisements on the cooperatives invoked Jewish workers' unique cultural and political aspirations. One 1929 listing for the Coops promoted its "Workers atmosphere, Library, School, Kindergarten and Cooperative Stores," reflecting desires for radical intellectual spaces where family needs could be communally met.[4] In 1929, workers would have heard news of a Russian costume party hosted by one of the cooperatives, featuring dancing, a 5-piece jazz band, and a reading by famous Yiddish poet Abraham Reisin.[5] They would have read about cooperative-hosted art exhibitions, political symposiums featuring speakers like the radical economist Scott Nearing, or Yiddish political theater put on by cooperative youth. As the mouthpieces of the Jewish labor movement, the left-wing press' mentions of the Bronx cooperatives reveal key attitudes of Jewish workers to which the cooperative endeavors attempted to respond. Workers sought to fashion themselves as modern radicals through dignified material conditions, intellectual and political enlightenment, and robust cultural activity. "The spirit" of the Jewish left wing, historian Paul Buhle quipped, "had soared past the existing Socialist party."[6]

Playwright Bertolt Brecht articulated this intimate relationship between politics and culture in the opening to his 1939 collection *Svendborg Poems* featured in this chapter's epigraph. A Jew and a Marxist, Brecht offered a paean to the power of art and culture to imagine

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[3] "Bronx Co-Operative To Build 3d Block of Workers' Homes," *The Daily Worker*, June 22, 1927.
[4] "Bronx Cooperative Colony," *Daily Worker*, July 9, 1929, City edition, sec. Classifieds.
[5] "Bronx Coöperative Plans Concert and Dance Saturday Eve," *Daily Worker*, June 9, 1927, City edition.
[6] Paul Buhle, "Jews and American Communism: The Cultural Question," *Radical History Review* 1980, no. 23 (May 1, 1980): 18.

radical futures. Composed while on the run from the Gestapo, this collection contributed to a tradition of Jewish culture producers whose art at once targeted their oppressive conditions and celebrated their ability to fashion dignity and joy in even the most trying of times. In their priority of cultural affairs that celebrated working class values, the Bronx cooperators took part in the tradition Brecht uplifted. Beyond the context of the Jewish Left, cultural historians like Carl E. Schorske have emphasized the inseparability of politics from mass culture. In his study of *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna,* Schorske identifies the entanglements between modernist art, architecture, and politics, producing what he termed "politics in a new key." There, a widespread revolt against traditional Austrian liberalism manifested in "ideological mosaics" spanning the political spectrum, from utopianism to nationalism, religious orthodoxy to secularism. Like the Bronx cooperators, Vienna's avante-garde mingled ideas and aesthetics seen as both "backward" and "forward," and cultures seen as both "high" and "low." Perhaps ironically, fin-de-siècle Vienna's appeals to anti-liberal political desires aroused strains of virulent anti-semitism on the one hand, and Zionism on the other[7]—neither of which found particularly strong bases among New York's Jewish Left. Nonetheless, by transcending the "purely political," what these movements shared in common was an offer to satisfy needs both social and spiritual.[8]

Indeed, "politics in a new key" might well reflect the way scholars of New York's Jewish left wing have described the movement's history. As Deborah Dash Moore emphasizes, "in the city spaces they inhabited, [Jews] integrated cultural and religious resources, social organizations and networks, with class and ideology."[9] Paul Buhle echoes these sentiments, citing a Jewish worker who claimed, "you can't separate the unions from the culture, which came first, both

[7] This is where Theodor Herzl developed his infamous political program for a Jewish state.
[8] Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 116-120.
[9] Moore, "On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in Three Boroughs," 252.

came from each other."[10] From mutual aid societies to Yiddish theater, journalism to political education, between the 1880s and 1920s the city's Yiddish-speaking labor movement was defined by this inseparability between politics and culture. Likewise, it was through these activities that the Jewish left wing staged fierce ideological debates over questions of assimilation and nationalism, socialism and communism. Yet as detailed in the introduction, coverage of the Bronx cooperatives in accounts of New Yorks' Jewish Left remains limited. By tracing the development of Jewish New York's robust political culture and its ideological diversity, this chapter illustrates where the Bronx cooperative's political cultures originated and why they represent a valuable site of analysis for study of the Jewish left more broadly. Who were these Jewish workers the press attempted to reach and how did they develop such political and cultural aspirations? While by the 1920s the Jewish labor movement had consolidated its strength through a robust public culture, it was at this moment that workers' crowded tenement conditions began to stand in stark relief against their cultural achievements.The second half of this chapter chronicles the growth of the housing cooperative movement that appeared to reconcile this glaring discrepancy. As the newspaper ads reveal, it was the cooperatives' dual offer of rich political cultures and dignified living conditions that captivated workers' attention. With housing cooperatives built by – and predominantly for – Jewish workers, the Jewish labor movement could elevate their material conditions through an organizational framework that facilitated the culture of politics they had established as vital to becoming modern radicals.

The Making of Modern Radicals

The unique political culture of New York's Jewish labor movement arose from the convergence of the modern socialist aspirations of labor leaders and those of recently immigrated

[10] Paul Buhle, "Jews and American Communism: The Cultural Question," *Radical History Review* 1980, no. 23 (May 1, 1980): 18.

Yiddish-speaking workers. The first major wave of Jewish immigration to the US took place across the 1880s-1890s, followed by a sharp increase between 1904-1914; totalling over 3 million, more than two thirds of them settled in New York City.[11] Historian Tony Michaels dates the emergence of a concerted Jewish labor movement to 1886, when the small Russian Jewish intelligentsia of the Lower East Side, inspired by Jewish workers' presence in the massive strike wave known as the "Great Upheaval," began viewing these Yiddish-speaking masses as ripe for assimilation into enlightened, cosmopolitan socialists.[12] Intellectual labor leaders like Abraham Cahan believed that, with proper education, the Yiddish-speaking worker could "jump from a medieval world… into a free republic, from a familiar shtetl into a seething metropolis."[13]

Yet Jewish radicalism was more than a modernizing doctrine imposed from above. Upon arriving in the city, Jews faced a stark contradiction between America's promise of freedom and the exploitative conditions marking their everyday life. A combination of dreadful working conditions and cultural homogeneity in the garment industry where most Jews found work catalyzed swift and natural resistance.[14] Moreover, in oral histories of immigrants and their children, many cite the oppressive experiences of Czarist pogroms as fueling a radical spirit which carried over from the old world, not to mention the many Jews who were already deeply involved in underground political organizing in the Pale of Settlement.[15] With a newfound freedom from persecution largely unfamiliar to European Jews, along with the unique social possibilities granted by city life, members of this generation were also quick to reject what one

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[11] Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (Wiley, 1979), 137.
[12] Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 123.
[13] Abraham Cahan, cited in Isaiah Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," in *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, vol. XVI (New York, 1976), 347.
[14] Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 166-175.
[15] Michal Goldman, Interviews With Coopniks, 2005 2000, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society; Rose Ourlicht, interview by Paul "Pete" Rosenblum, February 19, 1977, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society; Buhle, "Jews and American Communism."

immigrant called "the yoke of ordinances, commands and the strict legality" that characterized the Shtetl.[16] In New York, the authority Rabbinic orthodoxy had enjoyed in Europe was exchanged for the "sacred mission" of *oyfklerung*, Yiddish for "Enlightenment."[17] As Isaiah Trunk argues, the pre-existing scholarly traditions within religious Judaism were highly amenable to the educational tenets of the enlightenment.[18] Religion likewise lost its communal pull in New York. In Europe, cultural life centered around the synagogue, which, as one Yiddish-speaking journalist later explained, was "not only his [specifically not *her*] place of worship, but also his place of study and his club, his pride and consolation."[19] Yet Jewish immigrants' rejection of religion was not, in the words of Dr. Shlome Simon, "a wrecking process but a constructive one."[20] In the creation of a more modern "imagined community," Jewish workers filled the vacuum of sacred rituals with secular rituals, like reading Yiddish daily newspapers, and the lacuna of sacred spaces with secular spaces, like bustling union halls.[21] Through a hybridization of values equal parts socialist, enlightenment, and Yiddish, New York's Jewish workers created a robust public culture in which politics and culture became largely indistinguishable.

Culture of Politics / Political Culture

Jewish New York's culture of politics extended across practically every area of life. What began as political education in left-wing newspapers quickly expanded to unions and self-help societies, but also theater, poetry, and, of course, summer camps. Blurring the lines between all

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[16] Dr. Shlome Simon, "Fifty Years of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute," in *Our First Fifty Years: The Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute*, by Saul Goodman, 1972, 112.
[17] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 75.
[18] Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension," 343.
[19] L. Talmy, "Yiddish Literature: A Product of Revolt," *The Nation*, August 8, 1923.
[20] Simon, "Fifty Years," 112.
[21] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2016), 35.

facets of life, theirs was *culture of politics* as much as a *political culture*. Beginning in the 1890s, Abraham Cahan and founder of the United Hebrew Trades (UHT) Morris Hillquit began printing widely-read Yiddish daily newspapers like *Di Arbeter Tsaytung* – and by 1897, the soon-to-be famous *Forward (Forverts)* — which were packed with far more than socialist propaganda; the Yiddish press featured works of poetry, drama, and literature imbued with socialist themes.[22] The success of the Yiddish press spilled over into the streets and stages, as Jewish workers spent their available time and savings flocking to Yiddish theater and public lectures. "Friday night was lecture night. Saturday was given over to dancing. Sunday to the literary evening, with invited writers or poets. During the week there were rehearsals and classes," later explained the Yiddish journalist Melech Epstein.[23] Beginning in the 1890s, Jewish workers—both men and women—frequented *fortbildung*, or self-education societies, in droves, where they attended lectures and discussions on topics ranging from social democracy to anarchism, atheism to Darwinism.[24] Workers traded in the Talmud for the works of Marx, Lasalle, and Dostoyevsky. And through the creation of Yiddish literary journals, many demanded more than translating famous works into Yiddish; they aimed to contribute a modern (and *modernist*) literature of their own. It was the goal of such proponents as Chaim Zhitlovksy to make the names Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz internationally known. Inspired by Zhitlovsky, a large network of *shuln* – Yiddish children's schools – provided a vehicle to transmit radical, secular Yiddish education to New York's next generation of Jews that contested the "archaic nature of classical Jewish religious

[22] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 100
[23] Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U. S. A., 1919-1941* (Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 208.
[24] Isaiah Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," in *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, vol. XVI (New York, 1976), 350.

education and the lacunae left by the public school education."[25] Mirroring the Yiddish cultural landscape their parents' frequented, *shule* education fostered Jewish youth community through Yiddish choirs, orchestras, and drama infused with the subjects of class struggle and Yiddish folklore—reflecting both their contemporary struggles and those of their collective pasts. According to the organizer Yankev Levin in 1918, Jews had "built up a secular society which [could] develop in contact with modern, secular humanity."[26] Through Yiddish, New York's immigrant Jews merged culture and politics to fashion themselves into radical, secular, culturally-elevated workers.

While nearly all Jewish worker organizations sponsored educational goals, some attempted to fulfill unmet material needs. Following in the legacy of German Jewish *landsmanshaftn*, Jewish workers built mutual aid societies like the Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle) which provided social services like affordable health insurance, funeral assistance, and even medical care decades before the creation of the American welfare state.[27] Embodying their political mission, the slogan on the cover of a 1904 Arbeter Ring souvenir journal reads, "We struggle against sickness, premature death, and capitalism."[28] While their later platform would be dedicated primarily to political education, their 1892 founding goals included providing "mutual assistance to members in time of need and trouble," and "the creation of cooperative business ventures."[29] The predominantly Jewish garment unions followed a similar trajectory, beginning primarily as vehicles battling economic exploitation but eventually incorporating robust educational and cultural programming. Beginning in 1913, workers in the International Ladies

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[25] Fradle Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 2010), 120.
[26] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 179.
[27] Ibid., 180.
[28] Ibid., 185.
[29] Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension," 358.

Garment Workers Unions (ILGWU) took courses on union organizing and Marxist theory, with access to a free circulating library. Beyond the academic realm, unions hosted musical entertainment, parties, and monthly dances.[30]

In Jewish New York, workers believed that politics demanded more than doctrine and discipline. Politics deserved – indeed, they were enhanced by – the range of human experiences found in singing, dancing, reading, and recreating. So too, they believed that modern cultural activity ought not be simply frivolous. Rather, culture should reflect the realities of their troubled conditions and their revolutionary dreams. While most radical Jewish workers could agree on this statement, they couldn't agree on much else. Jewish New York's culture of politics was itself rife with ideological debates that played out within and across cultural institutions.

A Divided Movement

The ideological diversity of Jewish workers who populated the Bronx cooperatives originated in the political landscape of the Lower East Side. And few conflicts troubled the Jewish labor movement more than the question of assimilation. Already in the movement's early years, the assimilationist – what they termed "internationalist" – aspirations of the movement's leaders stood in stark contrast against the reality of the robust Yiddish culture they helped establish through the press. While labor leaders viewed Yiddish as "no more than a corrupted, illiterate German," as put rather bluntly by Morris Hillquit, they nonetheless regarded it as instrumental to the socialist project.[31] Radical intellectuals like Abraham Cahan realized that in order to sufficiently educate the Jewish masses in their enlightenment project it would be necessary to address them in Yiddish, even while he believed that the goal of Jewish socialists

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[30] Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism*, Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 65.
[31] Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension," 351.

was to "erase all boundaries between Jew and non-Jew in the labor world."[32] Yet while Cahan and other cosmopolitan labor leaders continued to promote assimilationist doctrines through the *Forward* well into the early 20th century, the Jews who arrived during the second mass immigration wave between 1904-1914 challenged these dominant ideals by infusing the existing labor movement with nationalist values.

Driven to flee the Pale of Settlement after a succession of pogroms in 1903 and following oppressive Russian crackdowns after the abortive 1905 revolution, this new wave of immigrants was poised to view the adoption of Jewish cultural nationalism as crucial to their survival. As the anarchist H. Zolotarov wrote in 1903, "To preach internationalism to the Jewish people is to preach its own destruction."[33] Moreover, many of these "1905ers" arrived in New York with experience in the Jewish Labor Bund, a political party attempting to translate the aims of socialism with Jews' unique ethnic position in Europe.[34] While these conditions led some immigrants to the burgeoning Zionist movement – defining the Jewish nation through *territory* – it led many others to the Yiddishist movement, defining the nation through *culture*. The Russian Jewish socialist Chaim Zhitlovsky was the foremost proponent of this Yiddish cultural renaissance and preached the project to New York's Jewish workers with great success during his visit from 1904-1905. Synthesizing socialism with what he termed "Progressive Jewish nationalism" (as opposed to the reactionary nationalism of Zionism), Zhitlovsky believed that *yidishe kultur* was not only about Jewish survival, but rather rejecting material and cultural domination through a thriving Yiddish intellectual and artistic world.[35] The conflicts between

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[32] Abraham Cahan, "Tsu Di Yidishe Arbeter Fun Di Fareynikte Shtatn Un Kanade," trans. Tony Michels, *Di Arbeter Tsaytung*, December 5, 1890, reprinted in Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts,* 76.
[33] Ibid., 356.
[34] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 100
[35] Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: A Study in Jewish Cultural History* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), 179.

cosmopolitans and Yiddish nationalists played out across myriad cultural institutions, including the Arbeter Ring. For decades, the organization fought tirelessly over whether to hold meetings and classes in Yiddish or English, until the Bundist wing of the organization finally won the case for secular Yiddish education in 1916.

While scores of Yiddish cultural institutions emerged in New York across the first decades of the 20th century, many were fairly indiscriminate when it came to members' politics. Though most were still to the left of average Americans, two of the largest of such institutions, the Arbeter Ring and the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, positioned themselves as explicitly "*umparteiische*" (non-partisan) when it came to party and ideology.[36] Meanwhile, a growing segment of Bundist immigrants began challenging what they viewed as the dilution of revolutionary content in Yiddish and socialist institutions. They viewed the now widely-read *Forward* (the de facto "spokesman for the Jewish working class"[37]) as not only dangerously assimilationist with its "potato-Yiddish" mixed-English content, but likewise dangerously reformist – if not politically useless – for shirking its socialist responsibilities by printing mostly profit-friendly sensationalism.[38] Dissatisfied by the vapid socialist newspapers and the mainstreaming of Yiddish content in the cultural institutions, key members of the Jewish labor movement viewed social-democratic reformism and assimilation as "two aspects of the same enemy," as Paul Buhle puts it.[39] They sought a strong party and a rigorous press; by 1917, the

[36] Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers*., 64.
[37] Tony Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face: The Origins of the Yiddish-Speaking Communist Movement in the United States, 1907-1923," in *Yiddish and the Left: Papers of the Third Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish*, by Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov, Studies in Yiddish 3 (Oxford: University of Oxford, European humanities research centre, 2001), 42.
[38] Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face," 32.
[39] Paul Buhle, "Jews and American Communism: The Cultural Question," *Radical History Review* 1980, no. 23 (May 1, 1980): 9

Bolshevik revolution and its global cascades provided the precedent to support these Leninist aspirations in New York.

This incipient left-wing broke off from the socialist movement altogether in an attempt to make good on the moment's revolutionary potential. In 1919 they formed the Communist Party, with its own internal Jewish federation, and by 1922, they began publishing the *Freiheit,* the city's first daily newspaper committed to the *combined* goals of social revolution and a sustained high Yiddish culture.[40] Its aim of "developing the literary and artistic tastes of the Jewish masses," as explained by an early editor, would appear to have reflected similar modernizing aspirations as its predecessors.[41] Yet in contrast to their political rivals, Communists viewed self-conscious Jewishness as "no compromise of class values but an enrichment and concretization of class reality."[42] Contrary to the melting pot perspective, Jewish Communists believed Yiddish culture brought Jews closer to the workers of the world, not further from them. Jewish Communists proposed a dialectic reconciliation of the nationalist-internationalist debate that had consumed the Jewish labor movement for the past twenty years.

From assimilationists to Yiddishists, social democrats to Communists—and every possible permutation in between—the ideological "civil wars" defining the Jewish left wing reached a zenith by the early 1920s. In addition to struggles caused by spikes in anti-semitism and political repression, such internal divisiveness has been credited in part for the Jewish labor movement's dissolution in the mid-1920s.[43] While these factors may have diminished its relative

[40] Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face," 42.
[41] Ibid., 43.
[42] Buhle, "Jews and American Communism," 15.
[43] Tony Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face: The Origins of the Yiddish-Speaking Communist Movement in the United States, 1907-1923," in *Yiddish and the Left: Papers of the Third Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish*, by Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov, Studies in Yiddish 3 (Oxford: University of Oxford, European humanities research centre, 2001), 49.

size and strength, the movement and its divisions were far from dead. In fact, this characterization may be more reflective of the social democratic and assimilationist wings' aspirations to consolidate ideological hegemony than a historical reality. Indeed, responding to this popular opinion, Chaim Zhitlovsky pointed out in a 1925 letter that, among other debates, "the struggle between the assimilationists and the nationally conscious elements has not yet ended. It is bitter and quiet."[44] Debates over cultural autonomy and assimilation, socialism and communism, continued to play out in worker institutions at every level, from newspapers to fraternal organizations. Yet as the Jewish labor movement grappled internally, the housing cooperative emerged as not only a tool for material betterment, but a vehicle to preserve its dissident ideological currents. The second half of this chapter traces the emergence of the Bronx housing cooperative as an urban technology that spoke to the sensibilities of several major currents within the Jewish labor movement—and through which these "bitter and quiet" battles continued to play out.

Cooperative Beginnings

As Michels and others have observed, several apparent contradictions plagued the Jewish labor movement just as its major ideological currents began to take shape. First, while New York's radical Jews enjoyed hegemony in the garment unions and access to a wealth of cultural opportunities outside the factory, the vast majority of them still returned home to tenement conditions that failed to meet their needs or reflect their modern sensibilities. A 1929 *Forward* article reporting on a conference on the "Future of American Cities" represented these sentiments. According to one panelist, "the present great city was becoming biologically alien… to an ordered human life," and continues, "nobody has found a way to reckon with the private

[44] Chaim Zhitlovsky, cited in Isaiah Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," in *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, vol. XVI (New York, 1976), 390.

landlord and his colossal pyramid of values."[45] Indeed by 1917, plummeting vacancy rates lent landlords power to raise rents at will to the point where complaints of price-gouging became widespread.[46] Amidst a postwar housing shortage that only amplified exploitative conditions, worker power had not translated to tenant power. Just as education and political self-actualization had become established tenets of modern radicalism across the broader movement, securing quality, dignified housing emerged as yet another modern qualification.

It is in the context of these apparent discrepancies that Jewish workers took notice of a burgeoning cooperative housing movement with the promise of satisfying all of these qualifications. By combining resources and redistributing all profits towards sustained services, the non-profit model advanced an efficient, affordable, profit-sharing system where all members democratically controlled a firm's decisions by way of vote.[47] Taken up in the United States by the early 20th century, the cooperative movement responded as much to a self-help imperative as to an economic one. James P. Warbasse, the leader of the Cooperative League of America, explained in the movements' journal *Co-Operation*, "[People] are moving to take in their own hands all of the things that are necessary for their own lives and happiness." This applied to far more than consumer products:

> The insurance, the banking, the housing, the pensions, the medical care, the recreational facilities, the schools, the libraries, and the social centers—owned and carried on by the people for themselves—proclaim their ability to be free from the exploitation of these necessities.[48]

Among the vast possibilities cooperatives offered, housing stood out not only given the harsh market conditions but for its ability to literally *house* multiple cooperative services at once. By

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[45] Harry Laidler, "Future of American Cities," *Forward*, July 7, 1929.
[46] Robert M. Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.
[47] E. G. Nourse, "The Economic Philosophy of Co-Operation," *The American Economic Review* 12, no. 4 (1922): 578.
[48] James Peter Warbasse, "Vital Issues," *Co-Operation* V, no. 1 (January 1919), 1.

the 1920s, housing cooperatives became a fascination of those from the political mainstream to the far left.

In 1924 the *New York Times* reported "cooperative success" across the city. In 1916, a colony of 450 Finnish families had established the city's first cooperative housing experiment for workers in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, replete with a cooperative meat market, bakery, and all "modern requisites for housekeeping." Soon after, the *Times* reported, a Presbyterian minister established a similar experiment called the "People's Tabernacle" in Upper Manhattan.[49] Taking notice of this innovative though marginal trend, a 1925 Bureau of Labor Statistics study lauded the development of the country's 40 known cooperative dwellings – all but two of which were located in New York City – as one element of the broader consumer cooperative movement. It attempted to answer the question most observers were asking: how did these otherwise impoverished workers suddenly go from tenants to co-owners? According to the study, the projects saw financial success through large-scale investments covered in part by members through upfront equity payments and in-part through a gradually paid-off mortgage. Yet since most wage-earning "owner-tenants" could not afford upfront shares, many received "comrade loans" from the cooperative associations made possible through loans and donations from private sponsors or neighborhood organizations. Interest on loans was canceled out by the interest they received on stock. These cooperative societies effectively "eliminate[d] the profit in housing" by prohibiting speculation on stock and capping member costs at shared monthly mortgage payments and a small fixed "rent" covering basic maintenance. The report proved correct in

[49] "Wage-Earners Succeed in Cooperative Housing: 450 Brooklyn Families Own Ten Apartment Buildings - People's Tabernacle Project Houses 50 Families - Significant Experiments," *New York Times*, 1924.

predicting that these existing New York City housing cooperatives would be "significant in showing others what can be done… by cooperative nonprofit effort."[50]

Indeed, cooperatives were amenable to far left ideologies as well. "If workers organize strong cooperative projects," a columnist for the *Freiheit* implored, "can we—Communists, who are in the vanguard of the workers movement—afford to ignore it?"[51] Many Left-wingers agreed. In 1924 the *Daily Worker* urged that, despite certain cooperative leaders' "reformist illusions" that it was possible to improve workers' conditions under capitalism, cooperatives could be wielded as a "weapon of class struggle." In addition to supplying low-cost necessities, cooperatives were well-suited to provide political education to the masses. They could also make use of their organizational structure to render material support towards strike funds and other revolutionary causes.[52] By 1926, the Communist paper featured a weekly "Co-operative Section" entirely dedicated to covering the growth of housing and consumer cooperatives from the Soviet Union to the Bronx.[53]

In 1920s New York City, housing cooperatives functioned like political Rorschach tests– – utopian canvasses fit to project urban dwellers' varied modern aspirations. The same was true for the various currents of the Jewish labor movement. As the previous advertisements demonstrated, housing cooperatives universally represented a way to reconcile Jewish workers' beleaguered living conditions with their modern sensibilities while facilitating their well-

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[50] US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Cooperative Movement in the United States in 1925 (Other than Agricultural)" (Washington, March 1927), 90-93.
[51] Lazar Kling, "Workers Cooperatives," *Morgen Freiheit*, February 9, 1926, Box 1, Folder 51, At Home In Utopia Collection, The Bronx County Archives at the Bronx County Historical Society Research Library.
[52] Algo, "An International Conference of Communist Cooperators," *The Daily Worker*, August 9, 1924.
[53] Esther Lowell, "Big Co-Operative Apartment in Gotham Will Be Ready for Tenants Early in November," *The Daily Worker*, October 12, 1926, sec. Co-operative.

established tradition of political-cultural activity. At the same time, the cooperative spoke to the distinct hopes of the various ideological currents within the Jewish labor movement.

Breaking Ground

In November, 1926 the United Workers Cooperative Colony (Coops) became the first of the three cooperatives to open its doors to union workers—and only union workers. In true Communist fashion, bosses or business owners of any kind were strictly prohibited.[54] Established by a group of workers active in the Jewish federation of the city's Communist movement, the Coops' founders positioned their housing cooperative in opposition to what they viewed as the mainstream cooperative movement's bourgeois tendencies.

In 1917, the same year as the Communist faction splintered from New York's Jewish left wing, a handful of its membership began operating a rooming house in an apartment building in Harlem, sharing a common kitchen, dining room, and library. After accommodating more than fifty workers, they realized that this method of pooling resources not only saved them money but offered residents a rich political atmosphere, plus access to leisure. Calling themselves the United Workers' Cooperative Association (UCWA), they quickly scaled up their operation, shuttling groups of workers to Westchester and New Jersey for overnight camping trips and, before long, founding a full-fledged summer camp in the Hudson Valley.[55] Camp Nitgedeigeit hosted the same slew of cultural activities left wing Jews enjoyed back in the city—plus those they could only access in the great outdoors—and its size gave workers beyond the original cooperative pioneers a taste of this lifestyle. In addition to singing revolutionary Yiddish folk songs and attending political lectures, they played baseball, swam in the lake, and gathered

[54] Rorty, "The Workers Build Their Own," 322.
[55] David Tucker, "What Is the United Workers Co-Operative and What Are Its Aims?," *Co-Operation*, July 1923, 9 edition.

around the campfire.[56] According to a reporter from *The Nation*, it was there that one summer evening in 1925 during a mass meeting of over 2,000 workers the UWCA decided it was "going after the New York City housing problem in earnest."[57]

However their earnestness didn't get in the way of setting clear political intentions. According to a report from the left wing Yiddish journalist Lazar Kling, the Coops' founders were skeptical of mainstream cooperatives' ability to challenge the dominance of large capitalist companies. Therefore, the UCWA viewed it as their responsibility to imbue the cooperative "with the spirit of the class struggle" and prevent it from being "converted into [a] pure business undertaking or into [a] petty bourgeois organization." They had no illusions that their cooperative would abolish the capitalist system. For, as outlined in the organization's founding aims, they defined the cooperative as merely "a weapon in the hands of the working class in the struggle for its emancipation."[58] It was with these clear political intentions that the first 300 "Coopniks," as they called themselves, moved into their cooperative apartments on 2700 Bronx Park East.

Roughly one year later and just over two miles up Mosholu Parkway, the first three hundred residents moved into their apartments at the Amalgamated Cooperative Houses. Where the Coops' founders attempted to distance themselves from the cooperative movement, the Amalgamated's founders not only embraced the value of "cooperation" unto itself, but also actively distanced themselves from the labor movement's expressly Jewish and political elements. To the Amalgamated's founders, cooperative housing thus provided a vehicle for

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[56] Michael Gold, "At a Workers' Vacation Camp."
[57] Rorty, "The Workers Build Their Own."
[58] Lazar Kling, "Building the Workers Coop Colony in New York," *Morgen Freiheit*, January 25, 1926, Box 1, Folder 51, At Home In Utopia Collection, The Bronx County Archives at the Bronx County Historical Society Research Library.

union members to manifest a modern sensibility grounded in the material and ethical benefits of "self-help."

Abraham Kazan, the project's founder, took interest in cooperatives from his keen sense of pragmatism. As a low-level secretary for the ILGWU, when he noticed union members struggling to access sugar during a wartime shortage, he arranged with the city's food commissioner to transport surplus sugar from the army to sell back to union members at cost, successfully delivering 2-lb bags to each of its seven thousand members.[59] Intrigued, he tried his hand at organizing a cooperative restaurant, hat shop, and even a cooperative matzo drive for garment workers celebrating Pesach.[60] His resourceful practices gained political substance after attending a lecture by the Scottish anarchist Thomas Bell. In an oral history, Kazan recalls Bell declaring that there was "no sense in trying to build a socialist society for improving conditions in the country, when we... haven't got the men to manage… You have to be practical to take over business."[61] While more militant labor leaders were busy "dreaming" about strikes and administrative change, they could be saving money through cooperative organization, according to Bell.[62] This was not a unique viewpoint within the cooperative movement. In his treatise on the movement's philosophy, Cooperative League President James P. Warbasse explained that successful cooperation could ultimately render strikes "negligible" and even touted political activity as potentially "hazardous" for workers.[63]

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[59] Abraham Kazan, The Reminiscences of Abraham Kazan, interview by L. Kaplan, 1967, Columbia University Oral History Research Office, 35.
[60] Kazan, "Reminiscences" 35.
[61] Ibid., 26.
[62] Ibid., 39.
[63] James Peter Warbasse, *Co-Operative Democracy: Attained through Voluntary Association of the People as Consumers:* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1923), 147-285.

Kazan carried this practical spirit with him to a job organizing with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), where the union's leader, Sidney Hillman, had already begun to promote a theory of "New Unionism," attempting to extend social benefits beyond the shop floor. Though both Kazan and Hillman emerged from Yiddish-speaking enclaves, their pragmatic approaches to unionism made them less susceptible to the Jewish labor movement's cultural traditions and more so to what historian Steven Fraser called the "blandishments of middle-class industrial progressives."[64] Strategically, by positioning themselves as ideologically neutral from the civil war between Communist and anti-Communist (and likewise nationalist and assimilationist) factions plaguing the garment unions, they achieved national recognition and a surge in membership.[65] Indeed, as Steven Fraser explains, the ACWA, "with each successful campaign… became less and less strictly Jewish, more and more cosmopolitan."[66] The educational programs New Unionism entailed reflected Hillman's attempt to distance himself from Jewish nationalist debates: classes were taught in English, not Yiddish; and they tended to emphasize a sort of "democratic high culture" that featured works by Mozart, Jefferson, and Shakespeare in addition to more radical authors. This was part of a middle-class project in which Kazan believed that cooperative housing had the potential to fashion its tenants into "self-respecting citizens" who would become cultured in "self-reliance rather than helpless dependence."[67] Though Kazan would never have used the word, the Amalgamated cooperative's mission can only fairly be described as assimilationist. It should come as no surprise then that the project enjoyed considerable financial support from the *Forward*, whose leadership historically

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[64] Steve Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York : Toronto : New York: Free Press ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991), 78.
[65] Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (Wiley, 1979), 213.
[66] Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 78.
[67] Abraham E. Kazan, "Coöperative Housing in the United States," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 191 (1937): 143.

waged intense debates against Yiddishists and Communists. Through the framework of cooperative housing, the Amalgamated's leaders forged a home for the Jewish labor movement's social democratic subculture.

Finally, in 1927, the Sholem Aleichem houses were established both geographically and temporally in between the establishment of the Coops and the Amalgamated. Likewise, its founders positioned themselves somewhere in between the ideological matrix of the Amalgamated and the Coops. The Sholem Aleichem's founders likely shared more in common politically with the Amalgamated's social democratic tendencies, while sharing, if not altogether elevating, the Coops' priority of Yiddish culture. Yet the house's precise political visions are difficult to confirm. In contrast to the other cooperatives, minimal remaining documentary records provide comparable insight into the Sholem Aleichem's founding ideology, perhaps due to its relative obscurity and its members' prominent use of Yiddish. According to historian Richard Plunz, participant accounts suggest that the project was started by members of the Yiddishist political network the Arbeter Ring who, like the Coops pioneers, had formed a small upstart housing cooperative in the preceding years before scaling up operations.[68] As previously mentioned, while the Arbeter Ring began as a mutual aid society, Yiddish culture quickly emerged as the "soul" of the organization's work.[69] By the 1920s, the Arbeter Ring swelled with cultural activity: they organized *shpatzirungen* (strolls) to the city's art museums and botanical gardens, impressive Yiddish choirs toured at Carnegie Hall, and members formed a Free Yiddish People' Theatre that weekly performed the works of esteemed Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem—the cooperative's namesake.[70] Perhaps the Arbeter Ring's most important

[68] Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, *A History of Housing in New York City* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 152.
[69] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 189.
[70] Ibid., 202-203.

undertaking—and one that persists to this day—was its secular socialist Yiddish education programs. Catalyzed by the pioneering Yiddishist Chaim Zhitlovsky, the Arbeter Ring not only established Sunday Schools (*shuln*), but elementary, middle, and high schools to carry on their robust *yidishe kultur* to second generation Jewish immigrants. Zhitlovsky's "Yiddish Diaspora Nationalism," which preached the construction of a robust Jewish culture scattered across the diaspora rather than tethered to a particular territory as Zionists proposed, demanded the perpetuation of the the Yiddish language to avoid the "violence" of American public education's melting-pot socialization.[71] Yet unlike the Yiddish-oriented Communists, the Arbeter Ring had by the 1920s declared itself "*umparteiische*" (non-partisan), prioritizing the continuation of Yiddish culture above any particular political program.

Both Richard Plunz and architectural historian Andrew Dolkart extrapolate from member testimonies that the Arbeter Ring's Yiddishist mission motivated the establishment of the Sholem Aleichem houses. The historian Fradle Pomerantz Friedenreich corroborates this in her study of Yiddish secular education *Passionate Pioneers*, where she notes the the creation of a house *shule* at the Sholem Aleichem called the *Yidishe co-operative heym shule* (Yiddish cooperative home school), around which house activities revolved.[72] While few documents speak to the period leading up to the project, early house meeting minutes written completely in Yiddish reflect its priorities, even if their content appears relatively mundane.[73] In some ways, the structure of the housing cooperative promised to facilitate the myriad interests of the Arbeter Ring's Yiddishists, from anti-capitalist mutual aid to robust Yiddish education. Thus, unique in

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[71] Chaim Zhitlovsky, "Should We Build Our Culture Here in English? Jewish Culture in Yiddish and in English," trans. Ri J. Turner, *Yiddish Book Center*, 1931.
[72] Fradle Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 2010), 273.
[73] Sholem Aleichem Cooperative Houses, "Executive Committee Meeting Minutes" (Bound Volume, Bronx, N.Y., 1941-1928), RG 393, YIVO Institute.

its aspirations from the Coops and the Amalgamated, the Sholem Aleichem's founders saw the housing cooperative as representing radical possibilities for the celebration and continuation of Yiddish culture in everyday life.

Conclusion

As utopian experiments in housing, the Bronx cooperatives simultaneously spoke to the distinct and overarching aspirations of the Jewish labor movement's ideological currents. For the founders of the Coops, the housing cooperative represented a "weapon" of class struggle—one filled with dancing, singing, studying, and marching. For Kazan and the Amalgamated, it may have represented a practical stepping stone to the middle class. And for the builders of the Sholem Aleichem, it was a fortress protecting against the violence of assimilation. But for all of the founders, the Bronx housing cooperative promised two critical things: an affordable solution to Jewish workers' dire housing conditions, and a home from which to host the diverse political cultures that defined the Jewish labor movement.

A cursory look at the Yiddish press' advertisements for the Bronx cooperatives would surely underscore how this innovative housing scheme spoke to these overarching aspirations. Taken altogether, however, the dramatic ideological difference separating each cooperative might not be clear. Just as there was never one coherent "Jewish Left," there likewise did not exist a coherent Jewish press. Indeed, the broader movement's preexisting ideological divisions translated to the cooperatives, beginning with select advertisements they funneled to readers. *The Forward* and its pragmatist figurehead Abe Cahan would only have ever advertised for the Amalgamated. Likewise, it would only have been from the *Morgen Freiheit* or the *Daily Worker* that readers would catch word of the Coops. Throughout my research, I did not come across any

advertisements for the Sholem Aleichem. But if I had to guess—and if they indeed existed—they might be found deep in the folds of the Arbeter Ring's monthly magazine *Der Fraynd*.

Tracing these throughlines demonstrates that the history of the Bronx cooperatives offers an invaluable framework through which to analyze the Jewish labor movement more broadly. But it would be a mistake to assume that the cooperatives' founding ideologies remained coherent—or were ever coherent to begin with. Despite cooperative founders' attempts at ideological cohesion, they had little control over the values members would bring to the houses. The next chapter charts the challenges each cooperative faced in their attempts to create a unified house, and the inevitable contradictions that accompanied this lofty project.

Chapter Two
Cooperative Contradictions

In February 1926, before the three Bronx cooperatives had even opened their doors to residents, an editor for the magazine *Cooperation*, the self-proclaimed organ of the cooperative movement in the United States, surveyed over forty-one cooperative housing projects across New York City. He was astounded by their diversity. They spoke different languages—from Finnish to Yiddish. They represented diverse political viewpoints—from the "extreme left" to the "extreme right." They varied significantly in their management practices—some elected boards of directors, some selected them from membership at random, and some even secured external management. Perhaps most of all, New York's cooperatives varied in their financial practices—some rigidly forbid members from subletting rooms or selling their stock at a profit, while others allowed the practice; some required members pay the full price of apartments up front, while others allowed payments through monthly installments; some charged flat rates for rooms no matter their size, others on a proportional basis. "Such are some of the different interpretations put upon the term 'Co-operative Housing' by two thousand of the residents of New York," the author summarized. [1] Though he editorialized at moments, hinting at his skepticism of certain groups' "neglect" for particular house matters, the author was overwhelmingly impartial in his characterization of the diverse forms the housing cooperative could take. Such varying approaches were neither good nor bad, but rather distinct "interpretations" of this still highly contested concept. According to his analysis, the very definition of cooperative housing was up for debate.

[1] Cooperative League of the U.S.A, "Cooperative Home Builders in New York," *Co-Operation*, February 1926, 22.

By the 1940s, however, a growing consensus emerged both within and outside of the cooperative movement declaring certain models superior, certain cooperatives its champion; the Amalgamated emerged firmly ahead. Accounts of the Bronx cooperatives both old and new tend to uplift the Amalgamated as a beacon of success in a sea of otherwise failed attempts at cooperative housing, doomed by political fracturing and financial fragility. For the Amalgamated's original peer cooperatives, financial difficulties forced the Sholem Aleichem to revert to traditional rental arrangements as early as 1929, while the Coops followed suit by 1943. The Bureau of Labor Statistics summarized this process in a 1947 report:

> Some hardy groups are willing to follow the cooperative method in all the steps… Others have started on that basis, but were defeated by inability to obtain financing or by the lack of thoroughgoing acceptance of the cooperative method by members…[2]

With an image of its manicured courtyards boastfully displayed on the report's cover, the Amalgamated was clearly presented as one of such "hardy" groups. Contemporary scholars echo such sentiments. "With stringent management of resources and the co-operation of its residents," explained Bronx historian Janet Munch, "Kazan managed to steer the Amalgamated away from bankruptcy with its reputation intact. Other Bronx co-operatives, such as "The Coops"... and the nearby Sholem Aleichem Houses, were not so for-tunate."[3] Likewise, when Coopnik Brenda Beattie Neuman attempted to landmark the Coops in 1986, she claims that members of the Amalgamated actively opposed the motion, implying that they were more deserving of such status because "the Amalgamated was still a cooperative and the Coops was not."[4] Yet the elevation of the Amalgamated may not be without reason. Indeed, it was one of very few

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[2] Florence Evelyn Parker and United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Nonprofit Housing Projects in the United States* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947)., iv.
[3] Janet Munch, "Community Building at Amalgamated Housing Co-Operative," *Bronx County Historical Society Journal* LVII (April 1, 2020).
[4] Brenda Beattie Neuman, Oral History, interview by Steven Payne, transcript, October 17, 2020, The Bronx African American History Project, Bronx County Historical Society.

cooperatives to outlast the Depression in its original form. While his peer cooperatives faced financial distress, Kazan continued to scale up his housing development operation, even earning the respect of the infamous slum-clearer Robert Moses, who honored Kazan as one of a few "hardy pioneers" with a "long record of success" eliminating city slums.[5] Kazan went on to oversee sweeping new projects, culminating in 1968 with the 60,000-person Co-op City in the Bronx, the city's largest single housing development. The narrative of cooperative diversity had given way to one of winners and losers.

This chapter challenges the tendency to elevate the "success story" of the Amalgamated. Instead, it interrogates the values underlying the "hardiness" that enabled it to survive all these years, situating it, as the editor of *Cooperation* once did, as one of many interpretations of the housing cooperative model. It also considers how the other cooperatives negotiated political struggles despite forgoing their cooperative status. The disproportionate attention on financial success obscures an underlying contradiction that each of the Bronx cooperatives faced: how could they build and sustain a cooperative driven by anti-capitalist values in a capitalist market? According to Ed Yaker, who grew up in the Amalgamated and is known today as its in-house historian, its success demanded a firm demarcation between "outside politics" and cooperative operations. As Yaker explained in a 2004 interview, "one of the key things Kazan did is he said, 'the business of this coop is this coop. Keep your outside politics out of the business of the coop.' He was able to do that, and it kept the coop together."[6] By comparing the Amalgamated to its "defeated" peer cooperatives, the Amalgamated's "hardiness" emerges as more of an active value than an inevitable imperative. For neither the Sholem Aleichem nor the Coops ceased

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[5] Robert Moses, "Master Builder Robert Moses on Abraham Kazan," *Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial*, 1977, 46.

[6] Ed Yaker, Ed Yaker Tape #109, interview by Michal Goldman, October 5, 2004, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society.

operating as cultural, political, and communal spaces after forgoing their cooperative designations—far from it, in fact. Preserved leaflets and memorial journals from the two cooperatives dating well into the 1960s attest to this fact. As soon as 1932, only a few years after its cooperative dissolution, members of the Sholem Aleichem staged a massive rent strike that demonstrated an alternative response to the Amalgamated's alleged bind between politics and finances. Without the cooperative structure, the Sholem Aleichem resorted to a different form of collective political action—one that, while imperfect, calls into question the inevitable conclusion of the Amalgamated's "success."

Commentators not only cite financial hardship for the "decline" of the Amalgamated's fellow cooperatives, but also failure to maintain a cooperative community. In theory, implied in the Amalgamated's prefigurative politics was a commitment to its own cooperative community above the lure of "outside politics." In practice, however, Amalgamated members routinely transgressed this priority by privileging other causes and failing to sufficiently "buy in" to the cooperative community on its leaders' terms. At the Coops, the priority of revolutionary struggle—or what the Amalgamated's founders would have called "outside politics"—was enshrined in its institutional structure. The house's ability to forge cooperative community while struggling for outside causes calls into question the supposed contradiction between politics and community. Nonetheless, the Coops faced their own unique challenge reconciling the question of whom cooperative membership should extend to. Former Coopniks recount facing divides between its first-generation immigrant founders who sought to preserve its Yiddishist roots through Jewish membership, and its second-generation who sought to support the cause of Black liberation through racial integration.

In the process of building communities of Jewish workers who valued the liberation of *all* workers, the Bronx cooperators were charged with a set of daunting questions: To what extent must they sacrifice political values to maintain a functioning house? Should their members invest their time and money in their own burgeoning yet fragile communities, or in causes outside the walls of their garden apartments? And who even deserved a room in the cooperative anyway? Refusing to answer the elevation of the Amalgamated's history with the elevation of its peer cooperatives, this chapter attempts to historicize the Amalgamated's particular set of politics as but one of many attempts at navigating the contradictions accompanying the cooperative venture. In doing so, it also questions the extent to which the discourse of "contradictions" itself contributed to this lopsided narrative.

Between Hardiness and Cooperation

Kazan was well aware of the failures of previous "short-lived" attempts at cooperative housing. "Therefore," he wrote to members two years into the project, the "Cooperative Community" of the Amalgamated carried a lofty responsibility to "see that this enterprise [...] is conducted along proper business lines."[7] Kazan was out to prove that his vision could function in the market economy—a goal he believed demanded a strict separation between politics and cooperative business. The first signs of this orientation are apparent in the cooperative's relationship to its namesake. For a housing development named after such a prominent union, the ACWA played a surprisingly insignificant role in the Amalgamated's history once it broke ground. To Sidney Hillman's disappointment, only 30% of the cooperative's first three hundred families were indeed union households.[8] For Kazan made clear that membership would not be

[7] Abraham Kazan, "Our Latest Step Forward," *Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial*, November 8, 1929, 44.
[8] Howard Charles Kaplan, *Amalgamated Cooperative Housing: An Empirical Study of Middle-Income Cooperative Housing In the State of New York.* (New Haven, 1958), 7.

restricted to union members—as it was in the early days of the Coops[9]—nor would the union "exert any influence on the cooperative," as stated in the Amalgamated's founding principles.[10] This was at least in part financially motivated. As Kazan later explained, "no project of such great proportions as housing should ever depend upon the fortunes and prosperity of any one industry."[11] If anything, the ACWA's role appears to have been more financial than political. As the benefactor of a great many early cooperators seeking loans to secure their first units, the union was asked for its money, not its politics—for, as Kazan readily admitted, "its interest was the general solvency of the project."[12]

The Amalgamated's distance from the union can be understood in the context of its leadership's broader mistrust of ideological politics. In his public writings, the Amalgamated's director of education, Herman Liebman, routinely condemned the corrupting influence of ideology compared to the more honest and practical value of cooperation. "Without verbal fanfares and theoretical bugles, without martyrdom and hero-worship," Liebman wrote to residents in a March 1930 edition of the cooperative's biweekly newspaper, "Cooperation plants the seed of economic and spiritual common-sense while the grand and glorious world-saving and epoch-making theories are still struggling with the wind."[13] Liebman saw the politics of vanguard parties and high theory as egotistical and idealistic, where Cooperation, without the promise of overthrowing systems, offered its adherents real social and economic benefits in real time. In April of 1931, Liebman debated the well-known socialist McAlister Coleman at an event

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[9] Cooperative League of the U.S.A, "Cooperative Housing De Luxe," *Co-Operation*, December 1926, 224.
[10] Abraham Kazan, "The Birth of Amalgamated Housing Corporation," *30 Years of Amalgamated Cooperative Housing 1927-1957*, 1957, 85.
[11] Abraham E. Kazan, "Coöperative Housing in the United States," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 191 (1937): 141.
[12] Kazan, "The Birth of Amalgamated Housing Corporation," 85.
[13] Herman Liebman, "Quo Vadis, Cooperation?," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, March 14, 1930, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund., 2.

hosted by the Amalgamated, arguing, in his own words, "that Cooperation can attain its goal of a Cooperative Commonwealth without political action." While Coleman attacked Liebman for his "hostility to Socialism," Liebman clarified that he was not against Socialism per se; in fact, he cites Cooperative League president Dr. Warbasse as frequently extolling the persistent value of socialists to the cooperative movement. Rather, Liebman denounced what he called "theoretical Socialism as preached during election campaigns" while upholding "practical Socialism" which, he explained rather self-evidently, "is Cooperation."[14] For Liebman, socialism and Cooperation shared the common goals of eliminating profit and exploitation; they disagreed on how to achieve them. Unlike "theoretical Socialism," Cooperation took a more prefigurative approach, attempting to reflect in the present the utopian world it sought to achieve in the future. At the Amalgamated, this meant that the house's economic and political structure was the very embodiment of its politics. By eliminating profit, members found savings on rent, groceries, and utilities by successfully employing the cooperative method. At various points between 1928-35, the Amalgamated even operated a cooperative bus that transported children to the local public school and later brought workers to the nearest subway station.[15] In theory, the responsibility of co-ownership would impress upon its members an interest in the project's future success and facilitate close communal bonds throughout the buildings. Likewise, its democratic administration of one-member, one-vote ought to develop members' belief in self-governance.[16]

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[14] Herman Liebman, "I Speak For Myself," *Amalgamated Co-Operator,* August 1931, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[15] Michael Shallin, "The Story of Our Cooperative Services," *We've Come of Age: Twentieth Anniversary Journal,* 1947., 26.
[16] Ibid., 141.

"Consumers' Cooperation, therefore, is the first step forward. The simplest step forward. The ONLY step forward," explained Liebman.[17]

Given Liebman's stern emphasis on practicality, his Cooperative values required policies to keep the corrosive influence of ideology from the financial structure of the cooperative. This meant restricting political topics to the realm of discourse. Indeed, cooperative events welcomed highly political topics, like one 1930 debate advertised in the co-op newspaper between two "foremost intellectual exponents of socialism and communism" titled "Which Will Solve the Workers' Problem?" Meanwhile, in the same edition of the newspaper, Liebman praised the house's ability to make "education, art, and culture stand above any and all 'isms.'"[18] Debates over left ideologies contributed to the cooperative's educational mission—part and parcel of becoming culturally–elevated cooperators—but were discouraged from its everyday activities. According to Liebman's account from the 20th anniversary journal, the cooperative's original members hastily established a slew of internal political organizations, from a Socialist Party chapter to a Workmen's Circle branch. Yet the Education committee quickly established vague policies of "tolerance and equality" to prevent political matters from interfering with house policy. Political groups were allowed to host meetings at the Amalgamated, "provided these activities do not conflict with each other, do not interfere with the general cultural work of the Education Department, and above all, do not hinder the proper and successful administration of the house."[19] While these numerous caveats appear to have given the Education Department enormous say in qualifying acceptable political behavior, it is unclear how these rather

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[17] Herman Liebman, "The Economic Trinity," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, August 1931, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[18] Liebman, "Quo Vadis, Cooperation?," 2.
[19] Education Department, "Principles Governing Group Activities," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, August 1, 1930, sec. Bulletin.

ambiguous rules played out in practice. Other rules were less ambiguous, however. Political campaigning, for example, was barred entirely within the cooperative by 1930. Likewise, while adult community members were allowed to participate in the house's political organizations, youth groups were prohibited from assuming any "political lining."[20] In order to socially and economically sustain itself, the Amalgamated sought to distance itself from politics.

That a housing project dedicated to the end of profit took such a firm stance against political action would not have struck Liebman as contradictory. This is because he viewed the cooperative method as an essentially politically neutral tool to achieving a free society. As he authoritatively declared in the newspaper, "Cooperation knows no politics."[21] But Liebman's capital-C Cooperation was, of course, political—even by his own standards. As Education director, Liebman mobilized the biweekly newspaper to engender a middle class culture amongst cooperators in which politics became effectively consumable—glib intellectual ventures, like an afternoon lecture or a book club at the cooperative library, which would "instill in their hearts" a "finer social intercourse."[22] It authorized certain practices and not others. For example, Liebman lauded the community's "civilized" endeavors in classical music and painting, but his paternalistic attitude flared over his particular disdain for whistling, which he called "the lowest form of communication."[23] Liebman's "non-political" Cooperation masked a politically moderate assimilationism. Claims of apoliticism weren't unique to Liebman or the Amalgamated, but rather a common line from the broader cooperative movement. For instance, the executive secretary of the Cooperative League, Cedric Long, cautioned in 1930 that the

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[20] Herman Liebman, "Twenty Years of Community Activities," *We've Come of Age: Twentieth Anniversary Journal*, 1947.
[21] Liebman, "The Economic Trinity."
[22] Herman Liebman, "Rooms or Homes – Which?," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, February 14, 1930, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[23] Liebman, "Quo Vadis, Cooperation?"

Coops' early financial struggles could be attributed to "the mistake of violating the principles of political neutrality."[24] From the cooperative's origins in Sidney Hillman's 'non-partisan' New Unionism to Liebmans' strict cultural policing, the Amalgamated's claims to "know no politics" were themselves highly political—claims to which its fellow Bronx cooperatives did not subscribe.

For better or worse, Kazan's cold economism and Liebman's finger-wagging may have indeed helped get the cooperative through the Depression. With many cooperators unemployed and over 60% idle on their rent by 1932, Kazan established a new schedule of rent payments, providing "substantial reductions" for a portion of residents.[25] Such benefits, the report emphasized, "were only made possible through economical management and careful administration of our affairs."[26] In September of the next year, the cooperative successfully instituted an emergency loan fund which redistributed resources within the cooperative to its most desperate members. Meanwhile, the Amalgamated continued to expand its footprint, adding its ninth building to the original six by 1940, and only a few scant cooperators were actually forced to leave for their inability to pay rent.[27]

Yet such successes did not come free of sacrifice. As Ed Yaker later quipped, "Kazan did whatever it took to keep this coop financially alive."[28] Without the board's knowledge, Kazan illegally opened up vacant rooms as rentals and developed a system of repaying outgoing

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[24] Cedric Long, *Consumers Cooperation in the United States by Cedric Long.* (New York: The Cooperative League of the U.S.A., 1930).
[25] Abraham Kazan, "Building and Financing Our Cooperative Homes," *20th Anniversary Festival Journal: Amalgamated Cooperative Community 1927-1947*, 1947.
[26] Amalgamated Housing Corporation, "General Co-Operators' Meeting," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, November 22, 1929, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund., 2.
[27] Kazan, "The Birth of Amalgamated Housing Corporation," 94.
[28] Ed Yaker, Ed Yaker Tape #109.

members' equity on an installment basis rather than upfront.[29] One former resident recalls Kazan nailing larger rooms shut until residents could afford to pay their full cost.[30] By 1933, even Liebman's now "emaciated" bulletin was cut from the Amalgamated's budget. When the economy only continued to decline by 1934, Kazan further infringed upon his cooperative principles by excluding cooperators with unpaid rent from participating in house committees.[31] Even a personality as strong as Liebman criticized Kazan's authoritarian move, calling the decision "hasty, revengeful, and uncooperative."[32] According to Liebman, the wrath of market economics, along with Kazan's "cold blade of budget mathematics," was encroaching on the Amalgamated's cherished cooperative virtues. Save for its financial scaffolding, the Amalgamated was on its way to becoming just "another apartment house," as Liebman once feared.[33] Where financial stability may have provided the cooperative its political foundations, the Depression tipped the tenuous balance between politics and finances, heightening its existing commitment to "hardiness" and forcing it to sacrifice even more of its political commitments.

"Moscow's Invasion of the Bronx"

While the members of the Sholem Aleichem Houses were the first of the Bronx cooperatives to give up their cooperative status to financial struggles, this fact seems to have been practically incidental to their ongoing communal presence. As the house officially went into receivership of the bank in early 1929, the executive committee continued its weekly duties as normal: collecting electricity dues, approving payments on new benches and curtains for the

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[29] Jennifer I-Ling Bernstein, "Outpost of Idealism: The Amalgamated Housing Cooperative and the Pursuit of a Just Society" (Brunswick, ME, Bowdoin College, 2006), Bowdoin College Special Collections.," 61.
[30] Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes/Amalgamated Dwellings; Built in 1931 by Idealism, Threatened Now by Reality," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1994, sec. Real Estate.
[31] Herman Liebman, "I Resign," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, January 1934, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[32] Liebman, "I Resign."
[33] Herman Liebman, "This Bulletin of Ours," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, July 1933, sec. Bulletin.

house auditorium, fielding grievances about personal disputes from club meetings. Indeed, the committee's meeting minutes record financial issues as well: the Children's Club began experiencing pressures to cover its instructor's weekly fees; a "serious situation" concerning electricity arose in which their utilities provider, Con Edison, almost shut down electricity in certain buildings after winter spikes in cost exceeded the house's income.[34] But it is also worth noting the economic conditions distinguishing the Sholem Aleichem from the Amalgamated from the start. Unlike the Amalgamated, the Sholem Aleichem did not enjoy the same generous financial backing from institutions like the ACWA or the MetLife corporation, which sponsored a number of members' upfront mortgages and buoyed the Amalgamated again when it began to experience precarity during the Depression. Furthermore, given that the Sholem Aleichem was established over a year before the Amalgamated, it was just shy of qualifying for the 1926 State Housing Act which sponsored the development of limited-dividend affordable development through tax-abatements for complying corporations.[35] It would likely have required more than "hardiness" for the Sholem Aleichem to persist in its original cooperative form.

Independent of these barriers to achieving the same financial success as the Amalgamated, the Sholem Aleichem's transition to a rental model opened up new possibilities for political and communal organization outside the constraints and advantages of the cooperative. Namely, it unlocked members' ability to openly express grievances within the naturally antagonistic relationship between tenant and landlord, combined with the communal and organizational power of a former cooperative. Having quickly collapsed under the contradictions of maintaining a cooperative in a capitalist market, the Sholem Aleichem

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[34] Sholem Aleichem Cooperative Houses, "Executive Committee Meeting Minutes" (Bound Volume, Bronx, N.Y., 1941 1928), RG 393, YIVO Institute.

[35] Abraham Kazan, "The Birth of Amalgamated Housing Corporation," *30 Years of Amalgamated Cooperative Housing 1927-1957*, 1957.

refashioned the cooperative's strengths to serve their newfound needs. These communal strengths were soon put to the test.

Once the house was sold to a landlord in 1931, residents formed the Sholem Aleichem Cooperative Association—a testament to their ongoing cooperative commitment—to adapt their cooperative foundations to the realities of their new status as renters. According to tenants interviewed by the local press, as the Depression forced more and more of them into unemployment, the association raised funds to help cover members' unpaid rents, much like the Amalgamated. They also leveraged their power to form a pact with their new landlord, Louis Klosk of W. 188th St. Realty Corp, to permit them to remain in their apartments so long as the tenants association covered their missing rent.[36] By August of 1932, the association had raised over $1,000 to help cover unemployed tenants' rent; according to the tenants, they had made good on their side of the bargain. Nonetheless, later that month Klosk went ahead and handed forty-eight Sholem Aleichem tenants eviction orders, charging them with failure to pay August rent.[37]

In response, the forty-eight tenants declared a rent strike, refusing to pay the dues they accused Klosk of erroneously charging them, along with all forthcoming rent payments, until he meet a growing list of demands: that all evicted tenants be allowed to remain in their apartments; that the landlord cover half of every unemployed tenant's rent, while the emergency fund covered the other half; and that all rent be decreased by at least five percent. Dozens of fellow tenants joined the strike in solidarity, and it lasted over five weeks. As the first forty-eight strikers were put on trial for their eviction charges, their housemates showed up to the courthouse

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[36] "Hearing in Three of 48 Cases Marked by Clashes of Court and Counsel," *New York World Telegram*, September 14, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.

[37] Frederick Woltman, "Bronx Tenants Win in Strike," *New York World Telegram*, September 26, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.

to picket with bolded signs hanging around their necks reading "UNEMPLOYED EVICTED! HOUSE ON STRIKE."[38] The decision to "accept the challenge" of the landlord was a collective one. As the story is reported, shortly before midnight on the evening of September 8th, hundreds of Sholem Aleichem tenants gathered in the house auditorium to map out their plans in the struggle against their landlord. In true cooperative spirit, tenants pledged that if the accused were ultimately evicted, they would still be fed in the house's cafeteria, welcomed into their fellow neighbors' apartments, and, when this was no longer feasible, sheltered in tents erected on the vacant lot opposite the buildings. Samuel Laderman, president of the tenants association, even threatened that the 200 Sholem Aleichem families would move "en masse" to another apartment complex, leveraging their collective power against the landlord.[39] Their cooperative commitments had extended well beyond the institution's economic expiration date.

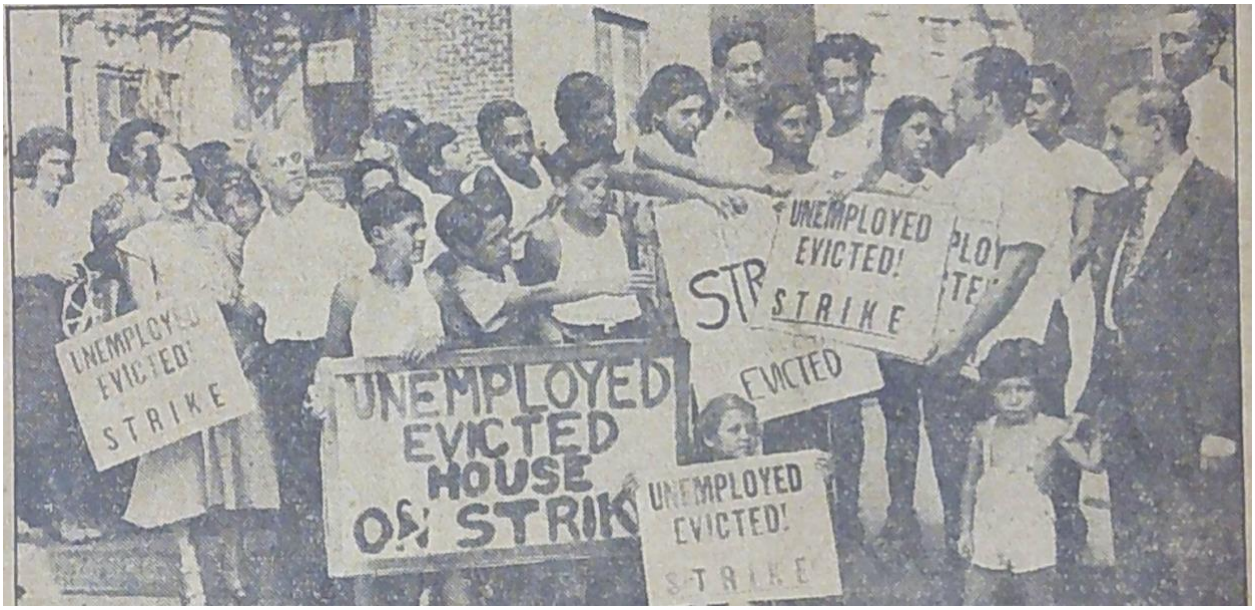

Figure 1. Sholem Aleichem rent strikers of all ages picketing outside the courthouse. *Bronx Home News*, August 27, 1932.

[38] "Rent Picketeers," *New York Evening Journal*, September 14, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.
[39] "Strike Continues at Giles Pl. House After 26 More Tenants Are Evicted," *Bronx Home News*, September 16, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute; "Other Tenants Ready to House Six Families Facing Eviction Today From Giles Pl. House," *Bronx Home News*, September 9, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.

As a community governed by Yiddish culture, some residents leveraged art as a means of protest. One tenant, the sculptor Aaron Goodelman, whose work was featured at the Brooklyn Museum, displayed his sculpture "The Stiff-Necked People" in the apartments' courtyard. In the words of one local reporter, the bronze sculpture renders an old man "from whose eyes there gleams resentment but about whose mouth there are the lines of patience and long-suffering. His feet are firmly planted."[40] Its title evokes God's accusation of the Jewish people from a passage in Exodus, condemning the Jews' stubborn and antagonistic nature. In a secular vein common among Yiddishists, Goodelman's sculpture reclaimed God's accusation as a point of pride. Like their Jewish ancestors, Sholem Aleichem tenants' feet remained firmly planted.

Figure 2. *The Stiff-Necked People*, Sculpture by Aaron J. Goodelman, Menorah Journal, 1923.

At first, the tenants' antagonistic response to their landlord did not translate to clear political successes. The first two tenants lost their dispossession trials to Klosk and his attorney. When the tenants presented receipts of their rent payments, Justice Morris, who presided over the trial, allegedly interrupted their testimony, exclaiming, "I decide that this is a tissue of lies."[41] Even more ominously, Klosk and the Bronx Landlords' Protective Association filed to seek legislation making rent strike agitation illegal and, in the meantime, threatened to create a blacklist of striking tenants to disseminate amongst

[40] "Culture Center in Bronx Unites for Rent Strike," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 28, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.
[41] "Hearing in Three of 48 Cases Marked by Clashes of Court and Counsel."

neighborhood landlords.[42] Sholem Aleichem tenants and their lawyer, Matthew Levy, accused Justice Morris of harboring anti-Communist prejudice, though most of the house's tenants denounced this identity themselves (such a degree of political nuance was likely lost on the judge). This belief would not have been far-fetched, for as they proposed the anti-strike legislation, the Bronx Landlords' Protective Association made clear that they believed "these agitators are mostly all Communist and are carrying on a war against all that law and order stand for."[43] Whether or not Justice Morris shared this view, the belief that rent strikers were Communists—and the threats that accompanied it—was widely circulated, as suggested by commonplace New York Times headlines from the period such as "Reds Battle Police in Rent Strike Riot" or "300 Reds Routed in Eviction Row."[44] Nevertheless, Levy retorted, "The fight for social justice cannot be thwarted by the calling of radical names or by an appeal to the prejudice of those who may have a childish fear of Moscow's invasion of the Bronx."[45]

As it turned out, Levy was right. The rent strike and court proceedings had gained so much publicity as to attract both local and national political attention, ultimately tipping the scale in favor of the tenants. One newspaper reported that a coalition of renters called the Bronx Tenants' League had thrown their support behind the Sholem Aleichem strikers, with "numerous offers of aid" coming in from across the borough.[46] In particular, a lawyer from the league, former Justice Jacob Panken, offered the tenants additional legal help in negotiations with the landlord. Furthermore, the strikes had attracted the attention of the socialist Presidential

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[42] "Bronx Tenants Organize Fight on Black List," *New York World Telegram*, September 19, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.
[43] "Rent Strike Curb Is Sought in Bronx," *New York Times*, September 18, 1932.
[44] "Reds Battle Police in Rent Strike" *New York Times*, January 23, 1932.; "300 Reds Routed in Eviction Row," *New York Times*, January 31, 1933.
[45] "Hearing in Three of 48 Cases Marked by Clashes of Court and Counsel."
[46] "Norman Thomas To Address Rent Strikers at Mass Meeting After Hearings in Court," *Bronx Home News*, September 19, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.

candidate Norman Thomas, who visited the Bronx to address the striking tenants in person. In a speech delivered to the tenants during another midnight meeting in their very own auditorium, Thomas promised to make their strike the "nucleus for a citywide campaign" against evictions and connected their struggle to the efforts of laborers and farmers organizing for protections across the country.[47] One week later, in a settlement Levy called "a complete victory for the tenants," it appears that political pressure and local support had forced Klosk to cave to the tenants' demands and more. As originally requested, the agreement reinstated all evicted tenants and reduced rents by five percent; it also required the landlord fulfill certain repairs to the house's social rooms. While the tenants did not win their demand that the landlord cover half of all unemployed tenants' rent, it mandated he redistribute 2.5% of all monthly rent payments towards a fund to take care of rent for unemployed families.[48] According to Jacob Panken, the case was the first in the country's history forcing a landlord to share the burden of their unemployed tenants.[49] The agreement effectively demonstrated the landlord's recognition of the Sholem Aleichem's cooperative organization. The tenants may not have received dividends or kept their house off the market, but the Sholem Aleichem proved through its rent strike that its cooperative principles persisted, if evolving to meet emerging needs.

The strike also demonstrated the house's ability to connect their struggle beyond the confines of their cooperative apartments. At the Amalgamated, Kazan and Hillman viewed it as the utmost necessity that the house demarcate "politics" from finances. For the Sholem Aleichem, the early reality of economic defeat demanded an alternative response: only through the solidarity attained by "outside politics" could the tenants attain financial stability. This

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[47] Ibid.
[48] "Chief Demands On Bronx Rent Won By Strikers," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 26, 1932, RG 393, YIVO Institute.
[49] Woltman, "Bronx Tenants Win in Strike."

struggle was not without sacrifice: nearly two months of courtroom struggles, fundraising for legal fees, and picketing on the streets undoubtedly demanded considerable labor and care work. It nonetheless offers a unique example of how the house's cooperative foundations could be refashioned in their new struggles as tenants. This story complicates the presumed inevitability of the Amalgamated's approach to the tension between politics and finances—indeed, it undermines the presumption of this tension altogether. Likewise, it challenges dominant narratives that financial failure necessarily meant cooperative failure—or the reverse. As one reporter noted in the aftermath of their successful negotiations, "The apartment dwellers went about their affairs yesterday with every evidence of contentment. Women gossipped in the sun along the sidewalk where the pickets had been wont to parade. Children played noisily in the courtyards."[50] Sholem Aleichem had resumed its cooperative activities, if they had ever truly ceased.

Utopia Begins at Home

By transgressing the Amalgamated's supposed bind between politics and finances, the Sholem Aleichem's historic rent strike reveals that this conflict was perhaps less self-evident than Kazan would have admitted. Indeed, upholding this tension was itself a political project. But for the Amalgamated's leaders, "outside politics" were not only framed as threatening to the project's finances; they were seen as a threat to the cooperative community itself. Implied in the Amalgamated's control over "outside politics" was a commitment to its own cooperative community above all others. Yet while the cooperative community took precedent for Liebman and Kazan, residents frequently negotiated this priority. This tension can be discerned from the house bulletin as early as 1929, when Liebman chided residents for being "silent and passive"

[50] Ibid.

and encouraged them to "contribute a little of [their] spare time… towards building a spiritual community."[51] This could look like investing time in the art center, or participating in literary clubs and orchestras. Some house members had indeed taken up his charge, Liebman explained in a 1930 editorial, embracing capital-C Cooperation "as a new and practical solution to our social problems." Others, however, "merely consider our Homes a convenient base of operations to further their own pet theories that may lie far away…"[52] For Liebman, the benefits of the cooperative should not be instrumentalized in service of distant struggles; if properly invested in, the cooperative venture was politically significant unto itself.

Such "pet theories," according to Liebman, included political parties or groups such as ICOR, a national organization of left-leaning Jewish workers assisting in aiding autonomous Jewish settlements in Birodjibhan, a remote eastern region of the Soviet Union.[53] In one perverse rebuke, Liebman attested to the strife pertaining to debates between house matters and outside politics:

> I have just discovered [two] new ways of committing Suicide:
> 1. Ask an ICORite why he sends his last dollar to Biro-Bidjan, five thousand miles away, when his own Cooperative Library is dying under his very nose.
> 2. Ask a member of the Socialist Branch to distribute a House announcement along with a Socialist leaflet some early Sunday morning.[54]

Liebman may have exaggerated this account in his attempt to portray these external causes as overly ideological. Nonetheless, this excerpt at least suggests the extent to which Liebman viewed this conflict between "outside politics" and cooperative community as particularly divisive, and likewise that he viewed his own position as practically self-evident. These tensions

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[51] Herman Liebman, "The Spirit of Cooperation," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, December 6, 1929, sec. Bulletin.
[52] Herman Liebman, "Is Intellectual Cooperation Possible?," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, June 6, 1930, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[53] Henry Felix Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924-1951*, Jewish Identities in Post Modern Society (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010)., xiii.
[54] Liebman, "I Speak For Myself."

continued throughout the Amalgamated's history. In a 1945 edition of the Amalgamated's renewed cooperative newsletter, Liebman suggested that the Amalgamated's members either took the splendors of their cooperative apartments for granted or were too absorbed by distant struggles to sufficiently invest in their own community. On the one hand, "too many of us are smugly satisfied with the benefits our cooperative houses offer each of us personally," he charged. On the other, "the unselfish, social-minded souls are giving ALL of their spare time, energy, and money to save China, Palestine, Russia and South America."[55] Before cooperators attempted to create a world utopia, they ought to put those values into practice in their own communities. As Liebman stated plainly, "Utopia begins at home."[56]

Why would fellow cooperators prioritize outside causes when their own community was struggling? Perhaps because they fundamentally disagreed with Liebman on the definition of the cooperative. Unlike Liebman, many of the Amalgamated's cooperators may have simply viewed the cooperative as a "convenient base" to host other political activities. Yet this need not have been as unreasonable as Liebman made it out to be. Sure, the library may have suffered and cooperative events may have fluctuated in attendance. But it is equally possible that cooperators forged the same sort of community ties that Liebman sought to facilitate by way of their "external" political commitments. Perhaps by organizing aid for Soviet Jews, or bail funds for radical political prisoners, they likewise strengthened their connections to their immediate community of Jews and workers at the Amalgamated. For they still hosted their meetings in the cooperative's library and auditorium; they still advertised their events on the apartment's bulletin boards. Paradoxically, the cooperative's more political members may have rejected the very

[55] Herman Liebman, "What Makes a Good Cooperator?," *Amalgamated Co-Operator*, April 1945, sec. Bulletin, Herman Liebman Memorial Fund.
[56] Ibid.

premise that organizing for external political causes existed in opposition to forging cooperative community. While they may have overlooked some of the cooperative's more immediate struggles, perhaps Amalgamated members reconciled this apparent tension by attempting to align their internationalist and communal values. Relying primarily on Liebman's testimony, this much is difficult to conclude. However, it remains a necessary consideration to entertain if we accept the premise that there was not a singular way to define the cooperative's function, nor a singular way to navigate the contradictions it presented.

A Weapon of the Working Class

It is easier to comprehend alternative responses to Liebman's alleged bind between outside politics and cooperative community in the case of the Coops, where not just individual members but the cooperative's founders took a distinct position from Liebman. In stark contrast to the Amalgamated, embedded in the Coops' founding principles was a commitment to struggles beyond the cooperative's walls. As stated by *Freiheit* reporter Lazar Kling in 1926, the United Workers Cooperative Association "does not undertake the task to become a substitute for the economic and political organizations of the working class." As a "weapon in the hands of the working class," the cooperative movement should only aim to "strengthen" these pre-existing organizations in the wider struggle for liberation. According to Kling, the UWCA "must be a constant help to the other revolutionary organizations of the working class and who will not allow the coop movement to be converted into a bourgeois or reformist movement."[57] Contrary to Liebman, the Coops' founders quite literally viewed the cooperative as an instrument in the broader class struggle; the housing cooperative was a means, not an end. Their founders would have undoubtedly viewed the Amalgamated, as they did of most other socialist institutions, as

[57] Lazar Kling, "Building the Workers Coop Colony in New York."

exemplifying such bourgeois tendencies, reforming capitalism from within and elevating their own members over workers who did not have the privilege to land a room at their idyllic cooperatives. They evidently anticipated the reactionary potential of becoming "owners" themselves, and thus established such clear principles to avoid this possibility.

The perception that the Coops was quite literally *revolutionizing* the role of the housing cooperative was shared by outside observers. According to a 1923 editorial from *Cooperation*, "The United Workers' Co-Operative Association is proving that co-operative housing is socially beneficial to others than the immediate members," a possibility that had yet to be demonstrated by previous ventures.[58] To enshrine this in their institutional structure, the UWCA made several novel decisions. First, they declared that in addition to redistributing rebates towards social and recreation services as many cooperatives did, they would also contribute to a fund to be used for "general radical causes." According to *Cooperation*, the Coops was directing institutional funds towards the exact struggles Liebman had cautioned against. "$100 has recently been contributed to the Jewish Workers Relief in Russia; 20 shares in the Russian-American Industrial Corporation were purchased. Other sums have been given to the amnesty work for political prisoners and similar causes."[59] From its inception, the Coops rejected the Amalgamated's assumption that their cooperative give priority to the cooperative community over outside causes. As former Coopnik Norma Shuldiner summarized in an interview, "It is not the Coops that made our political lives. It was outside."[60]

Rather than simply flipping the Amalgamated's terms of debate, however, the Coops rejected its terms altogether. For its members attempted to align communal values with broad

[58] David Tucker, "What Is the United Workers Co-Operative and What Are Its Aims?" 115.
[59] Tucker, "What Is the United Workers Co-Operative," 116.
[60] Norma and Bernie Shuldiner T052, interview by Michal Goldman, 2004, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society., 1.

working class values across all areas of cooperative life. In one of the only scholarly accounts of the Coops, anthropologist Anita Schwartz conducted an ethnographic study of former residents in the late 1960s in which she accounts for the array of house cooperative activities that bridged these values. First, the cooperative's youth clubs were symbolically named after historic struggles beyond their own: "The Roy Wright Club was named after one of the Scottsboro Boys. The Ella May Wiggins club was named after a murdered leader of textile strikers in the south."[61] Likewise, classes were taught at the cooperative *shule*—which was open to Jewish youth outside the Coops—on topics ranging from Jewish history to Black history, labor history to current events. Cultural events featured drama, song, and poetry covering these issues, blurring the lines between community building and politics. According to Schwartz, Coopniks sang "Red Army songs, Negro spirituals, union songs, and Yiddish songs about brotherhood and freedom." Though most of these songs were sung in Yiddish, cultural activities at the Coops "emphasized the suffering of *all* the poor, not just Jews."[62] Indeed, throughout oral histories and reunion journals, former Coopniks recall organizing in solidarity for numerous outside causes: from picketing against the nearby Bronxwood pool for discriminating against Black visitors to advocating for Spanish loyalists during the country's civil war.[63] A recurring memory found across oral histories recalls Coopniks' attendance at a 1949 concert in Peekskill, NY in which Paul Robeson, a famous Black singer and a defender of the Soviet Union, was attacked suddenly by local White supremacists. According to residents, Coopniks in attendance quickly organized to fight back against the rioters and help defend Robeson and his band. The men were armed

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[61] Anita Schwartz, "The Secular Seder: Continuity and Change among Left-Wing Jews," in *Between Two Worlds : Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry*, by Jack Kugelmass (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988),112.
[62] Schwartz, "The Secular Seder," 111.
[63] "The United Workers Cooperative Colony 50th Anniversary Reunion Journal," 1977, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society.

with baseball bats and the women with knitting needles, claimed Bernie Shuldiner. Having heard word of the riots, the remaining Coopniks at the cooperative welcomed back the militant concertgoers with cheering crowds.[64] As Robin D.G. Kelley has demonstrated, at a time when even the most progressive mainstream politicians seldom addressed racial discrimination and bigotry, Communists (many of them Jewish) were among the few publicly voicing solidarity with Black Americans.[65] For example, a photograph from the Bronx County Historical Society from May Day 1937 depicts Coopniks marching with a massive sign reading "White labor will never be free with Black labor enchained."[66] According to oral histories with former residents, not Yom Kippur but May Day was the most important holiday of the year at the Coops. Every year, the entire house would take the day off—kids included—to march downtown to Union Square in solidarity with workers everywhere. "We had had May Days before we came to the Coops, but the group feeling wasn't there," explained Pearl Itzkowitz Spivack during a celebration of the house's 50th anniversary. "Here, *everybody* was participating, everybody came out,

Figure 3. May Day Parade, New York City. Bronx County Historical Society, At Home in Utopia Collection.

[64] Norma and Bernie Shuldiner T051, interview by Michal Goldman, 2004, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society.
[65] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
[66] "May Day Photograph," 1937, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society.

everybody was dressed up."[67] Of course, these activities weren't purely selfless—and they certainly didn't always come at members' expense. Coopniks transformed organizing for fellow workers into a cooperative celebration.

By blurring the work of outside organizing and cooperative community building, Coopniks rejected this apparent tension imposed by the Amalgamated's founders. In his study of Yiddish socialists in the ILGWU, historian Daniel Katz proposes the concept *mutual culturalism* to describe the mutually beneficial relationship forged between workers of various ethnic and racial identities. Working from the premise that all ethnic identities are grounded in class relations, Katz argues that Yiddish socialist garment workers viewed the struggles for fellow working class ethnic and racial communities as bound up with their own. According to Katz, Yiddish-speaking workers, like those from the Coops, believed that "the ability for subordinate ethnic groups to coexist [was] critical to the struggle for social justice and should be encouraged as a central component of movement building."[68] Thus, Coopniks' struggles alongside fellow workers would not have been viewed in opposition to their communal mission, but in harmony. This should come as no surprise, given that the very promise Jewish Communists had made when they first began organizing in the 1910s was, as Paul Buhle puts it, the "realization of 'national' and international aspirations simultaneously."[69] At its core, the Coops' *mutual culturalism* may just be a modern articulation of a very old tenet in the Jewish tradition: to connect one's own oppression to that of others.

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[67] "The United Workers Cooperative Colony 50th Anniversary Reunion Journal," 19.
[68] Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism*, Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 6.
[69] Buhle, "Jews and American Communism," 18.

Yet it would be naive to portray such a seamless alignment of the Coops' internal community and external commitments. While this may have been far more true at the Coops than the Amalgamated, oral histories from second generation Coopniks offer a more contested picture of the cooperative's political loyalties. While its Yiddishist and Communist impulses may have worked in tandem to spur unique forms of community building, these values came into tension over cooperative membership. Already by 1929, the Coops had made strides to admit several Black families in addition to its predominantly Eastern European and Russian Jewish makeup. Across the following decades, however, the house was only ever home to roughly fifteen Black families in total.[70] While there were of course structural factors impeding integration, this was also due to internal struggles. At a 1949 tenant's meeting, second generation Jewish Coopnik Bernie Shuldiner got into a "clash" with his father-in-law about further integrating the Coops. According to Norma, her father's generation was uneasy about what integration might mean for the "Jewish cultural community" they had been developing at the cooperative. Despite their internationalist politics, many first-generation residents feared the impending loss of the Yiddish culture for which they had fought so bitterly to preserve. Indeed, many Coopniks from Norma's father's generation were known as "1905ers," Jewish immigrants who'd arrived in New York after that year's attempted revolution in Russia and the wave of deadly pogroms that followed. Many already were—or soon became—Bundists, and the radical Yiddish enclaves they had fostered were a rejection of Tsarist violence as well as Abraham Cahan's assimilationist doctrines. They likely viewed cooperative integration as yet another iteration of the same threat. To Bernie, however, his father-in-law's generation was "trying to hold back the future" from the Coops.[71] Already somewhat removed from their parents' Yiddishist traditions and largely

[70] Brenda Beattie Neuman, Oral History.
[71] Norma and Bernie Shuldiner T052.

insulated from anti-semitic violence, Bernie's generation did not find the prospect of cultural "mixing" so threatening. For their parents, Communism and Yiddish culture were practically inextricable; politics looked like revolutionary Yiddish theater. For them, Communism was multiracial; it meant protesting for the Scottsboro boys. According to Buhle, the cultural dimension of these second-generation Jewish communists was perhaps just as strong as that of their Yiddishist parents. Yet where their parents worshiped the likes of Yiddishist literary and theatrical figures, Bernie's generation praised the likes of Paul Robeson and Woodie Guthrie.[72]

The Coops may have challenged the Amalgamated's supposed bind between cooperative community and outside politics, but they encountered contradictions of their own. As a cooperative founded upon the marriage between internationalist working class politics and Yiddish culture, they tactfully rejected Liebman and Kazan's view that "utopia begins at home." Defining their own "imagined community," however, presented more challenges.

Conclusion

After considering the Bronx cooperatives' struggles and successes, the discourse of "cooperative contradictions" appears just as political as the cooperatives themselves. The Sholem Aleichem's historic rent strike challenges the Amalgamated's founders' premise that "outside politics" were inherently at odds with sound finances. When financial instability inevitably hit, the Yiddishist cooperative mobilized its political foundations to successfully fight for tenant protections that kept its residents at home, strengthening community along the way. Meanwhile, Kazan opted to sacrifice political values in order to maintain the house's cooperative economic structure. But this apparent contradiction need not have been an inevitability. This raises questions regarding the relationship between cooperation *as a value* and cooperation *as a*

[72] Buhle, "Jews and American Communism," 25.

financial model. To what extent did each cooperative sacrifice one side of this coin in service of the other? Was the housing cooperative a means or an end? The rich political community the Coops built through the very practice of "outside politics" also challenges the Amalgamated's founders' claim that such politics were inevitably at odds with fostering cooperative community. Where the Amalgamated attempted to restrict political activity in order to maintain a united house, it was paradoxically these restrictions that ultimately spurred internal conflict between members and leadership. The discursive production and reproduction of the inevitability of these "cooperative contradictions," as articulated by Kazan and Liebman and as accepted at face value by dominant historical narratives, collapses the diversity of interpretations as to the very function of the housing cooperative, and more importantly the diversity of values underlying them.

This chapter does not intend to suggest that the Coops or the Sholem Aleichem necessarily produced more successful attempts at the cooperative method. As demonstrated, each of these cooperatives faced their own unique set of contradictions. For example, how might a project refashion its cooperative structures after reverting to a traditional rental? And how might a cooperative negotiate glaring differences in values between generations of members? Rather, by comparing these three cooperative histories, this chapter has attempted to question the very definitions of "success" and "failure" when it comes to cooperative housing. In doing so, it affirms what the editor of *Cooperation* articulated in 1926: that the very function of the housing cooperative was still up for debate. Crucially, it remains so today.

Chapter Three
Longing For Home:
Cooperative Nostalgia and the Racial Politics of Memory

> The twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia.
> — Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

The fraught political challenges that defined the Bronx cooperatives in their early years would appear, after decades of distance, to have dissolved into a wistful nostalgia. The former Coopnik Bella Halebsky reminisced about her bygone community in a 1977 interview. "It was the biggest family I ever belonged to… It was a village… a complete community, we had everything a working family could need or want… It was a dream that came true… It was a utopia."[1] These sentiments persisted decades later for the retired Yiddish professor Eugene Orenstein who reflected on his childhood in the Sholem Aleichem houses in a 2011 interview: "this was the most beautiful accomplishment, to give young people establishing families the chance to live in wonderful conditions out in the rural Bronx, at that time."[2] As early as the 1970s and as recently as 2020, scholars, documentarians, and cooperators alike have interviewed former cooperative residents to get a glimpse into the daily rhythms of a life that seems increasingly difficult to imagine. Their recollections are not all glittering, but they are nonetheless characterized by a shared sense of awe at the experiments they once called home.

Due to a scarcity of documentary records and the highly personal nature of the recollections, determining whether these recollections are "accurate" may be impossible. But assessing accuracy may also be ultimately less valuable than exploring what these oral histories reveal about the historical conjunctures in which they were recorded and the historical nature of

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[1] Anita Wallman Schwartz and Pete Rosenblum, "The Utopia We Knew," *The United Workers Cooperative Colony 50th Anniversary 1927-1977*, 1977.
[2] Eugene Orenstein, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project, August 26, 2011, Yiddish Book Center.

the emotions they reflect. In particular, the nature of nostalgia found among former cooperators may be traceable to broader trends across the end of the 20th century, if nonetheless grounded in local conditions. The utopian dreams and revolutionary struggles that shaped this "age of extremes" across Europe and North America gave way to ruptures and reactions that left its early revolutionaries with little more than memories.[3] Nostalgia is not only a temporal emotion, an epidemic symptom of modernity, but a spatial emotion, connecting people to real or imagined communities. In her groundbreak book *The Future of Nostalgia*, known for pioneering the study of this singular emotion, the Russian literary theorist Svetlana Boym traced the history of the word "nostalgia" to its relatively modern invention by a 17th century Swiss medical student who coined the term to describe the condition of feeling wrought by homesickness. "Leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions, opium, or a trip to the Alps usually soothed the symptoms, but nothing compared to a return to the motherland, which was believed to be the best remedy for nostalgia."[4] As Boym points out, this definition is reflected in the word's Greek roots: "*nostos* meaning "return home" and *algia* for "longing."" Like other former utopians at the end of the 20th century, the Bronx cooperatives' residents-cum-reminiscers were quite literally longing for home.

Particularly in the discipline of History, nostalgia carries a negative valence. It fuels irrational romanticism, historians claim, fogging memory and obscuring truth. It leaves room for what historian Michael Kammen termed "history without guilt."[5] Boym's intervention, however, offers a valuable alternative to this empirical dead-end. This chapter is an attempt to demonstrate

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[3] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914 - 1991*, First Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
[4] Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (June 22, 2007): 7.
[5] Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 688.

that the narratives we are told about the past can also tell us something valuable about the present. Boym by no means minimizes the potentially distorting impacts of nostalgia on historical memory. For her, nostalgia is a useful emotion to study not only because of what it readily reveals, but also precisely because of what it attempts—consciously or unconsciously—to obscure. Indeed, to Boym, nostalgia consists of both "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed."[6]

Using this framework as a launching point, this chapter examines Bronx cooperators' historical memory to explore how nostalgia—or lack thereof, in some cases—reveals both tangible changes to the political possibilities of utopia since their peak in the 1930s and 1940s, and likewise conceals important historical fabrications about the racialized nature of their utopias. First, I argue that second-generation cooperators' nostalgia and disbelief at the sheer heterogeneity of their apartments' left political community reflects the ideological effects of the Cold War and neoliberalism on the diminished possibility of left-wing politics in America. Likewise, former residents' nostalgia for their urban utopias can also be traced to the widespread loss of community ushered in by suburbanization. In the particular case of the Amalgamated, the effects of the financial crises and austerity measures of the 1970s provoked a unique sense of nostalgia for the utopian urbanism upon which the project was founded. At the same time, by tracing the close relationship between the cooperative housing movement and the racist project of urban renewal-fueled slum clearance through the perspectives of Black and Puerto Rican residents, I demonstrate that the "utopia" former cooperators dreamed of may not have fully existed, at least for the Bronx's communities of color. By expanding the source base beyond Jewish cooperators, it becomes clear that, even for the radical Coops, whose beneficiaries tout its

[6] Boym, "Nostalgia," 7.

legacy as a uniquely progressive site of racial justice, the cooperative communities did not equally serve its Black residents.

Longing For Home That No Longer Exists

Residents' memories of cooperative politics tend to characterize the sheer heterogeneity of political viewpoints with equal parts awe and ridicule—in both cases, however, they appear uniquely unimaginable in the present. As retired Yiddish professor Marvin Zuckerman, who grew up in the Amalgamated, explained in a 2013 interview:

> [The house] was politicized… unique, I think, in that way. In other words, people discussed politics, you knew everybody's politics. You knew that the Friedmans were Communists—actually, it was a mixed-marriage: she was an ardent Zionist and he was a Communist—you knew that so-and-so was an anarchist, so-and-so was a Bundist, so-and-so was a Zionist, and so on. Everybody had some kind of politics.[7]

This sense of uniqueness resonates for Esther Nelson Sokolsky, a dancer who grew up at the Sholem Aleichem in the 1930s and 1940s. In a 2018 interview, she explains that her family was one of very few Communists at the Socialist-dominated house. Unprompted, Sokolsky quips, "and of course the Communists fought with the socialists," before releasing a deep laugh and musing to herself, "fascinating."[8] Ruth Shor's was one of those families. As she explains in a 2018 interview, "my parents were called right wingers; they were socialists—that was what a right-winger was."[9] While perhaps less phased by this fact than Sokolskly, Shor knowingly offers this explanation for what she expects might seem incomprehensible today. Yok Ziebel of the Coops offered a more dismissive explanation in a 2002 interview: "now what we knew as kids, the Amalgamated Houses were our enemies. They were social democrats—politely called social democrats—but we were told they were Trotskyites… None of us ever went to visit the

[7] Marvin Zuckerman, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project, January 7, 2013.
[8] Esther Nelson Sokolsky, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project, December 21, 2018.
[9] Ruth Shor, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project, December 21, 2018.

Amalgamated Houses." Ziebel speaks with a dispassionate distance, suggesting that these sectarian differences were perhaps naively germinated by their parents—for that was just "the atmosphere we grew up in."[10] The Yiddish professor and former Coopnik Eugene Orenstein stresses a similar detached disdain for the inter-cooperative politics. Recounting the local history he explains, "Amalgamated Clothing Workers of North America opened a major cooperative housing project the same year that my, in quotes, project was opened very close to us…And it was Social Democratic—right-wing socialist—the terminology of that day."[11] His self-mocking air-quotes perform a sort of distancing from his former political attachments and their attendant sectarianism. And, like Shor, his clarification of right-wing socialist as "terminology of that day" affirms his historical—and perhaps moral—distance as well.

What makes these sentiments specific to this contemporary context? One way to identify the historicity of nostalgia—or lack thereof—is to compare the recollections of first and second generation cooperators. Reminiscences of a robust Left community across the cooperatives predominate amongst the houses' second generation. These children of the co-ops were raised by their apartments' tight-knit communities, took on their fervent political ideologies, then proceeded to witness a full-scale attack on these beliefs across the Cold War. Indeed, as an epicenter of the Communist Left, New York was naturally also an epicenter of anticommunism.[12]According to anthropologist Anita Schwartz, like other Left-affiliated organizations, the Coops in particular found itself under strict surveillance throughout the McCarthy era. Beginning in the 1950s, members report FBI agents stationed outside the

[10] Yok Ziebel, interview by Michal Goldman, April 12, 2002, At Home In Utopia Collection, Bronx County Historical Society.
[11] Eugene Orenstein, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project..
[12] Joshua B Freeman, *Working-Class New York Life and Labor Since World War II.* (La Vergne: The New Press, 2021), 72.

apartment's courtyards; Coopniks feared being photographed during their cherished May Day rallies, which were once emblematic of the house's political pride; some members were even brought on trial by the House Un-American Activities Committee.[13] As the journalist Calvin Trillin put it, "simply having the address 2700 Bronx Park East was thought to be enough to put people in jeopardy."[14] Out of necessity if not active desire, most residents ditched their political commitments, and having attained a degree of upward mobility unfamiliar to their parents, most found themselves raising their own families in single-family homes from New Jersey to California. They may have been children of the Coops, but their own children were children of the suburbs.

This dramatic shift gave second generation cooperators a unique perspective that likely shaped their perceptions of cooperative politics. For their parents' generation—cooperative "pioneers" as they were called—the political community at the Coops may not have felt so out of the ordinary. This division between first and second generation recollections is exemplified by an oral history of Coops pioneer Rose Ourlicht conducted by second generation Coopnik Pete Rosenblum. Leading up to the house's 50th anniversary reunion in 1977, Rosenblum conducted interviews of Coops pioneers to celebrate the cooperative's legacy. His earnest nostalgia is embedded in his leading questions: "so a lot of the political activities [at the Coops] were done together… What would you say if you had to write a history of the Coops? How would you put it?" But Ourlicht lacks Rosemblum's sentimentality. "To me it's a tragedy," she replies. She found herself disappointed by the house's financial mismanagement and political dogmatism. "There was corruption, dishonesty, clique-ism, we believed we were led like sheep…" Rosenblum pushes back: "but wasn't it successful for a period of time? [...] One of the things

[13] Anita Schwartz, "The Secular Seder: Continuity and Change among Left-Wing Jews."105.
[14] Trillin, "The Coops."51.

that people from my generation have discussed is that we feel like it was not a failure because, first of all, we have something that nobody else has—the experience of growing up inside this kind of community." Having developed a firm political community before moving into the Coops, however, for Ourlicht "it was nothing new." "That's like if you would have belonged to any Yiddish movement," she counters.[15] This sentiment resonates with a later interview with second generation Coopnik Yok Ziebel, who recounts his mother's experience as a first-generation cooperator. "My parents and her friends, that generation, never really talked about what they might have felt were accomplishments…of some social progress. They never talked about that. It was part of life to them." Political community and social justice were "like breathing to her," explained Ziebel.[16] Indeed, many pioneers had themselves immigrated to New York to escape pogroms in feudal Russia, where they had already been radicalized by Bundist politics. What had since become foreign to second generation Coopniks was for their parents as natural as the air they breathed.

For second generation cooperators, the political community at the Coops was remembered as special in a way it wasn't for their parents' generation. Granted, Rosenblum's generation's nostalgia might be attributable to youthful wistfulness, and there were likely pioneers who shared Rosemblum's sentiments. But this generational difference must nonetheless be viewed in the context of the extreme loss of political community they experienced between their childhood and adulthood that made the cooperatives seem so unique. For their immediate loss of community in the Bronx was accompanied by a much broader "Crisis of the Left." Beyond brutal Cold War anticommunism, the advent in the 1970s of the neoliberal moral and economic order had repositioned the individual as the primary political subject and finances as

[15] Rose Ourlicht.
[16] Yok Ziebel., 12.

the primary driver of social policy. As the scholar Wendy Brown explained in a 1999 article, written soon before the majority of second-generation cooperative interviews were conducted, "the losses, accountable and unaccountable, of the Left are many in our own time":

> We are awash in the loss of a unified analysis and unified movement…in the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism…We are without a sense of an international, and often even a local, left community; we are without conviction about the truth of the social order; we are without a rich moral-political vision to guide and sustain political work. Thus, we suffer with the sense of not only a lost movement but a lost historical moment; not only a lost theoretical and empirical coherence but a lost way of life and a lost course of pursuits.[17]

By the late 1970s, not to mention the 2000s, it was impossible to conceive of much of a left-wing at all, let alone a robust, heterogenous left. For the nostalgics among second generation cooperators, it is precisely this lost way of life that by the 2000s—and even by 1977—inspired awe at the projects they'd once been a part of. And for the late critics among them, it was this loss of conviction, the loss of a historical moment and the possibility it entailed, that invoked such dismissive rebuke.

Beyond the specific loss of a left-wing politics, former cooperators' nostalgic reminiscences reflect a more widespread dissolution of community during the last decades of the 20th century. In his book *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam quantifiably demonstrated a generalized decline in the experience of "social capital" amongst Americans beginning in the decades after 1970. This manifested in declining civic engagement like participation in activism, but also a lack in more ubiquitous social interaction like relationships between neighbors. According to Putnam, one cause of this phenomenon was increasing suburban sprawl.[18] Perhaps more so than most families, former cooperators grew up in dense social networks within their cooperative

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[17] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 22.
[18] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

apartment complexes. In stark contrast to their current isolated and socially-bounded suburban lifestyles, the architecture of the cooperative's enclosed garden apartments gave them free reign as children to play with friends without leaving home. Esther Sokolsky recalled being welcomed into other cooperators' apartments to play their piano—to which she attributes to her career as a musician and dancer.[19] Marvin Engel, who was born in the Coops to parents among the project's original pioneers, echoed this shift in a nostalgic recollection at the 1977 Coops reunion. "We had advantages my kids in the suburbs don't have. We had so many kids in the Coops. Even six months difference in age was a great divide. But my kids live in relative isolation," Engel explained.[20] Another cause Putnam cited for this dramatic shift were increasing generational differences. Putnam argued that people born in the 1920s-'30s, like most second generation Coopniks, were far more socially active than their children's generation. This alone was attributable to a wealth of factors, but one stress in particular was the entry of the alienating culture of television more widespread among the younger generation. These generational distinctions come alive in reports from the Coops' 50th anniversary celebration. According to a reporter who covered the reunion:

> The third generation of the original "Coopniks," some of them teen-agers and products of the suburbs, looked and listened with a mixture of amazement and amusement as their elders melted with emotion, recalling a youth of sports, dances, political activism and marches in May Day parades.[21]

Compared to the cooperative, where clubs and activities were marked by their intergenerational nature, this later generation appeared increasingly alienated from the lives their parents once led.

This broader decline in community was also reflected by local politicians who took advantage of the Amalgamated's 1977 bicentennial memorial to commemorate Kazan. Their

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[19] Esther Nelson Sokolsky, Yiddish Book Center Wexler Oral History Project.
[20] Schumach, "Reunion Hails Bronx Housing Experiment of 20's."
[21] Ibid.

remarks celebrated the cooperative's historic contribution to utopian urbanism in light of what was seen as the city's decaying economic and political prospects. As recounted in the house's memorial journal, these nostalgic reminiscences reflect various spins on a common sentiment: the Amalgamated cooperatives were more than just apartment buildings. The city's former Mayor Robert Wagner captured this essence most succinctly when he claimed, "Abe not only built houses, he built communities."[22] Likewise, for ACWA President Murray Finley, "Amalgamated cooperative housing meant more than mere shelter at low rentals…they constituted a whole new way of life for the families."[23] Others filled in the blank: "a standard of excellence and pattern of community life"[24] (Bronx Borough President Robert Abrams), "new roads to community living in a great metropolitan urban setting"[25] (Amalgamated Cooperative President Hyman Bass), even "the rebirth of spirit"[26] (Wagner). Notably, even though the original Amalgamated cooperative still existed at the time of publication, the authors refer to these achievements in the past tense, as if they remain unrealized—or presently unrealizable—dreams.

Naturally, the cooperative committee behind this memorial journal likely commissioned these statements, and beyond that may lie even more confounding motivations for delivering such glowing remarks—the accruing of political credit from Kazan being not the least of them. Yet authentic or manufactured, accounts from political respondents in the Amalgamated's reunion journal reveal how nostalgia for the cooperative's early days was mobilized towards contemporary political ends. Ultimately, these past-tense utopian characterizations and the

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[22] Joint Community Activities Committee, Amalgamated Houses, "Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial: 50 Years of Amalgamated Housing Corporation," 1977., 24.
[23] Joint Community Activities Committee, 34.
[24] Ibid, 9.
[25] Ibid., 15.
[26] Ibid., 24.

political ends they served reflected a widespread consensus among politicians that the city's political culture had shifted from one centered around the "community" to one centered on the individual.

As current or former politicians, the respondents are equally as forthright in their attempts to instrumentalize Kazan's past successes as they are in their nostalgic sentiments. As Wagner exclaimed, "today more than ever New York needs decent housing for working families."[27] From various political positions, they cite various causes: "fiscal crisis"[28] (Commissioner of New York State Division of Housing John G. Heimann), "disastrous inflation"[29] (Bass), "refusal of Republican leaders"[30] (ILGWU President Sol Chaikan). Likewise, they mourn various lost emblems the Amalgamated upheld for them. For Congressman Herman Badillo of the Bronx's 21st district, it was the "promise of citizen-activism."[31] For his neighboring Congressman Jonathan Bingham, it was the Amalgamated's "imagination, courage and determination."[32] Politicians projected nostalgia for the Amalgamated onto their most convenient political needs. But according to the urban planner Roger Starr in his memorial remarks, the historic shifts were unarguable: "it may be a slight exaggeration to say that the cooperative housing movement lies in ruins, but only a blind zealot could possibly describe it as healthy."[33] Behind all of these failures, he explained, was an overwhelming "decay in the sense of community" underlying the city's political structures. These political shifts map on to the broader neoliberal trends

[27] Joint Community Activities Committee, 24.
[28] Ibid., 11.
[29] Ibid., 15.
[30] Ibid., 38.
[31] Ibid., 10.
[32] Joint Community Activities Committee, Amalgamated Houses, "Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial: 50 Years of Amalgamated Housing Corporation.", 10.
[33] Roger Starr, "Cooperative Housing Today: Observations on a Golden Anniversary," *Golden Jubilee Journal and Kazan Memorial*, 1977, 40.

underlying cooperators' felt sense of loss. According to Starr's analysis, "we have gone from a period of social democracy, with idealistic substructure of belief in the value of joint action for the individuals involved, to a period of social anarchy in which the value of an act is to be measured solely by its immediate benefit to its perpetrator."[34] For all commentators alike, individualism, not community, permeated the the political landscape of late 1970s New York, foreclosing the kind of utopian communities that dominated the historical imaginations of the Amalgamated's late acolytes.

Longing For Home That Never Existed

Historical "imagination" indeed. Tracing the legacies of voices like Roger Starr's beyond their cooperative-friendly New Dealism calls into question the underlying politics and people included—or more importantly, excluded—by that now-decayed "sense of community" for which he waxes nostalgic. Likewise, it questions the politics and people represented by Kazan and the broader cooperative movement from its inception. While the political and economic conditions that limited the cooperatives' continued utopian possibilities were myriad—from Cold War anticommunism on the one hand, to neoliberal austerity measures on the other—expanding the source base beyond the voices represented by the cooperatives' former residents and acolytes reveals working class communities of color who were either never included in these utopian housing experiments or whose marginal perspectives were tokenized. While the Bronx cooperatives' peak during the 1930s-'40s was marked primarily by de facto racial exclusion, the following period from the 1950s-'60s saw a surge in cooperative building that actively expropriated land from the city's communities of color. Indeed, when framed as a building block "from Ellis Island to the Suburbs," the upward mobility and cultural capital afforded by the

[34] Starr, "Cooperative Housing Today: Observations on a Golden Anniversary," 41.

Bronx cooperatives appears instrumental in Jewish immigrants' gradual induction into White America.[35] What might this nostalgia reveal about a home—to borrow Boym's term—that perhaps *never existed*, at least for New York's communities of color?

Before its resounding collapse in late 1970s, New York's cooperative housing movement found renewed support in the early 1950s through collaboration with the city's federally-funded urban renewal regime and its ringleader, Robert Moses. Title I of the 1949 Housing Act equipped city governments with wide-reaching authority to condemn areas they deemed "blighted" and direct federal funds towards slum-clearance and redevelopment, with minimal accountability to rehouse those displaced in the process. In 1951, Kazan established the United Housing Federation (UHF) to quite literally take his cooperative visions to new heights. Four years later, Kazan's 21-story East River Houses became the city's first project to benefit from Title I funding. With the help of Moses and architect Herman Jessor (responsible for designing both the Coops and the Amalgamated), Kazan departed from the style of his former garden apartments in favor of the economic benefits associated with modernist tower-in-the-park design, whose rental costs beat those of new garden apartments by a third.[36] During the project's groundbreaking ceremony former Amalgamated cooperator and ILGWU president David Dubinsky declared, "fifty-three years ago, the ILGWU was officially organized to war against the sweatshop… We return to wipe out the slum!"[37]

In the translation of utopian unionism to utopian housing, the Jewish cooperative movement took up the rhetoric and policies that were also responsible for the widespread

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[35] David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey From Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, Pbk. ed (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
[36] Ralph Katz, "Garment Union Housing Project on the Lower East Side Is Dedicated," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1955.
[37] Cited in Julie Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx," *Pakn Treger*, Winter 1998, Yiddish Book Center., 16.

displacement of communities of color, most of whom were largely excluded from their utopian experiments to begin with. Despite its worker-oriented mission, East River Houses and most subsequent UHF co-ops evicted and displaced predominantly Black and Puerto Rican residents, while rehousing very few—and even fewer in actual Title I housing.[38] Like his earlier projects, though lacking their cooperative vigor, these projects overwhelmingly housed Jewish and Italian families, confirming fears from the Black community expressed in the *Amsterdam News* that the cooperative would be "lily-white."[39] Even amongst White critics of discriminatory housing like Charles Abrams, it was understood that Kazan's projects were notoriously all white despite ostensible open-door polices.[40] Kazan and Moses' 1965 Rochdale Village, which was integrated at 15% Black residents and displaced nobody (being built on the site of the Jamaica racetrack) remains the exception to this rule, but only after a sizeable counterattack against slum clearance had developed from critics like Jane Jacobs.[41] "To outsiders," writes historian Joshua B. Freedman, "Moses and Kazan may have looked very different, but they recognized each other as brothers under the skin."[42] Ultimately, the period of what James Baldwin infamously termed "Negro removal"[43] was also considered to be the "golden age of labor-sponsored cooperatives."[44]

The strange bedfellows that were slum clearance and cooperative housing remained intertwined well into the 1970s, when political commentators attempted to mobilize Kazan's

[38] Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 118.
[39] *New York Amsterdam News*, 1952.
[40] Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing*, (Port Washington, N.Y: Kennikat Press, 1955), 317.
[41] Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 119.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Brent Cebul, "Tearing Down Black America," *Boston Review*, July 22, 2020.
[44] Louis Winnick, "Opinion | When an Apartment Fulfilled an Ideal," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2000, sec. Opinion.

cooperative record to respond to present struggles. Just a year before he mourned the city's "decaying sense of community" in the Amalgamated's 1977 memorial journal, Roger Starr promoted a deeply conservative response to the city's fiscal crisis in the New York Times magazine. Borrowing the pathologizing language of urban renewal, Starr argued that the best way to solve the city's debt crisis was to triage resources from neighborhoods he deemed "sick"––most of which were Black and Puerto Rican. By reducing city services from firefighting to public transit and condemning their "blighted" housing through what he termed "planned shrinkage," Starr's case for "Making New York Smaller" effectively demarcated the boundaries around *his* imagined community, outside of which his utopian cooperative visions need not apply.[45] Even after Kazan's cooperative housing movement had collapsed, its legacy was being touted towards the aims of slum clearance.

For good reason, perhaps, the cooperative housing movement had earned an exclusionary reputation among Black and Hispanic New Yorkers. Kazan's largest (and last) project, Co-op City, attempted—and failed—to repair his sorry record on racially equitable housing. Set to host 15,500 apartment units over a massive 330-acre tract of filled marshland in the northeast corner of the borough, in 1965 the project was proposed as—and remains—the largest cooperative housing project in the world. It would feature thirty-nine apartment towers ranging from 24-35 stories tall, all arranged around its own shopping centers, elementary schools, and vast swaths of green space.[46] According to a 1967 *Times* article, Kazan and the UHF aimed to make sure this project was both economically and racially integrated, but given Kazan's record, neighborhood organizations had their doubts.[47] Their fears were confirmed when nearly 90% of Co-op City's

[45] Roger Starr, "Making New York Smaller," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1976, sec. Archives.
[46] Thomas W. Ennis, "15,500-Apartment Co-Op to Rise in Bronx," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1965.
[47] Steven V. Roberts, "Co-Op City Blend of Races Sought," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1967.

initial applicant pool was white. While community organizations petitioned UHF to allow the city to sell at least 20% of units at low-income carrying costs, UHF insisted on a "voluntary approach to integration" for fear of "tear[ing] the cooperative into two separate groups."[48] Such a tired excuse against this meager plea for integration neglected the fact that the Bronx had long been torn in two, a truth that was set in stark relief at cooperatives across the borough in 1982 when over 4,000 superintendents, porters, handymen, and doormen went on strike demanding better pay. At the Amalgamated, while Hispanic handymen like Hilario Cruz picketed for a decent wage, White residents like Nancy Blank were reported complaining about their missing garbage services.[49]

It is in this context of continued cooperative exclusion that the Puerto Rican-born reporter and former organizer for the radical Young Lords Party, Pablo Guzman, lamented the development of Co-op City where once stood a local theme park. In a 1988 issue of *New York Magazine* containing oral histories of city residents Guzman explained, "what's ironic is that Co-op City was built on Freedomland, which was our Disneyland." For Guzman, the project did not represent the same "freedom" it would for white families. Likewise, in sharp contrast to his remarks in the Amalgamated memorial journal a decade prior, former House Representative from the South Bronx Herman Badillo put it even more bluntly when he proclaimed, "everybody knows that the word 'co-op' is a synonym for 'Jewish housing.'" Due to financial and cultural barriers, he explained, Blacks and Hispanics were de facto excluded. "Therefore, if you're building a co-op… you are, in effect, creating a white enclave."[50]

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[48] Peter Blauner, "The Voice of New York: An Oral History of Our Times," *New York Magazine*, April 11, 1988.
[49] David Bird, "Housing Strike in Bronx Curbs Tenants Services," *The New York Times*, September 21, 1982, sec. New York.
[50] Peter Blauner, "The Voice of New York: An Oral History of Our Times.", 63.

Despite the overwhelming evidence to back Badillo's criticism that "'co-op' is a synonym for 'Jewish housing,'" it is nonetheless a disconcerting thing to hear about projects that were originally founded upon the aim of delivering decent housing to a community of immigrant workers. Yet even as discriminatory FHA redlining policies continued to exclude Jews in addition to Blacks and Hispanics throughout the 1930s and 1940s, American Jews had by the 1980s attained a degree of economic and racial privilege that set them on a distinct course from minority communities for whom the possibility of securing access to Whiteness was rendered null by skin color and the legacies of colonialism and enslavement. Due in no small part to the economic and cultural advantages of cooperative housing, Jewish residents from each of the three houses followed broader trends among Jewish New Yorkers on the vast exodus from city to suburb that shrunk the city's Jewish population by over 100,000—half of which came from the Bronx alone.[51] Due to an ascendant liberalism that attempted to erase through legal and culture means a relatively recent history in which Jews and Italians, Poles and Irish, were largely considered "inferior European races," by the 1960s, the consolidation of Caucasian identity in the US fashioned Jews "as white as all the white people in the world."[52] Indeed, having overcome forms of occupational discrimination, many New York Jews had by then attained advanced degrees, locating jobs in finance, real estate, medicine, publishing, and law.[53] Thus, middle class Jews whose parents once resided at America's racial and economic margins likewise shared Anglo-America's aspirations for the suburban pleasures of "homeownership and privacy, grass and trees that did not have to be shared with others."[54]

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[51] Deborah Dash Moore et al., *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* (NYU Press, 2020)., 306.
[52] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002)., 133.
[53] Moore et al., *Jewish New York*, 288.
[54] Moore et al., *Jewish New York*, 3.

In fact, the Jewish cooperators who preferred not to decamp to the suburbs of Riverdale or Westchester found themselves rooms in the semi-urban periphery of Co-op City. Beyond the newfound possibilities of upward mobility, their exodus also reflected racist anxieties of neighborhood change. Kazan's United Housing Federation admitted as much when its executive vice president explained, "there is no sense in denying that a lot of people are trying to escape from something. They are running, as so many have been running, from changing neighborhoods."[55] At the 1977 reunion, when the children of second-generation coopniks "look[ed] and listened with a mixture of amazement and amusement as their elders melted with emotion, recalling a youth of sports, dances, political activism and marches in May Day parades," their parents' nostalgia was tinged not only with a lost sense of political possibility, but also a uniquely racialized set of conditions from which they now spoke.[56]

Rethinking the "Radical" Coops

If the legacy of racial exclusion permeates the cooperative housing movement well into the late 20th century, the early integration and antiracist activism of the Coops would appear to stand out as a progressive exception. This is, at least, the way many former Coopniks have recounted the history. In a 2002 interview conducted for the PBS documentary *At Home in Utopia*, when asked about the house's political legacy, former Coopnik Bernie Shuldiner uplifted the role of Communist residents in the vanguard of civil rights:

> In my early days in the movement, when nothing was moving, nothing was moving on the Negro question, nothing. We were the first, as YCLers [Young Communist League], as young people by the way, who forced the issue onto the streets and into the schools and everywhere as regards Black participation in society…[57]

[55] Steven V. Roberts, "Co-Op City Blend of Races Sought."
[56] Murray Schumach, "Reunion Hails Bronx Housing Experiment of 20's," *New York Times*, 1977.
[57] Norma and Bernie Shuldiner T052.

Like Shuldiner, many other Coopniks testified to the importance of their contributions to racial justice at a time when few white-dominated institutions took these concerns seriously. Stories abound about Coopniks protesting the 1930 trial of the Scottsboro boys, a group of nine Black teenagers in Alabama falsely accused of raping two white women; or their defense of the famous Left-wing singer Paul Robeson during a 1949 concert in Peekskill, NY where Robeson was assaulted by white supremacist rioters. Across Coopniks' present-day recollections, stories of racial justice appear just as central as their annual May Day parade. Indeed, as previously mentioned, scholars corroborate the significant contribution made by Black and Jewish Communist Party members alike in these early fights, particularly when more liberal organizations like the NAACP failed to take action.[58]

Yet Coopniks' paternalism toward the Black community is shot through their recollections as well. Shuldiner touts his accomplishments bringing Black friends to all-white beaches, along with "myriads of campaigns [where] we went into the Negro community in an effort to awaken them as regards their political potential."[59] Ultimately, like many fellow former residents, he firmly believed in the house's success as an early example of racial integration. Though few published works have documented the Coops' history, one widely-viewed account, the 2009 documentary *At Home in Utopia*—for which many of the oral histories cited in this chapter were conducted—tends to reflect this more nostalgic Jewish perspective on the house's racial history. Though the director Michal Goldman interviewed several Black families, their stories remain rather marginal to the film as a whole and include few criticisms of the house's racial politics. Obscuring the underside of what was, in reality, a far more fraught relationship between Left-wing Jews and Black Americans, the film thus contributes to the largely

[58] Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 84.
[59] Norma and Bernie Shuldiner T052.

oversimplified narrative of rosy Black-Jewish alliances which scholars such as Cheryl Greenberg have necessarily "troubled."[60]

Yet through the efforts of the Bronx African American History Project (BAAHP), more recent testimonies collected from Black former Coopniks contest this nostalgic narrative. In a 2020 oral history, Black former Coopnik Warner Thomas, who grew up in the cooperative during the 1940s, appears more ambivalent about the house's success at integration. While he recalls his childhood there quite fondly, he maintains that the handful of Black residents nonetheless struggled to establish Black affinity spaces that gained the same degree of support as the house's Yiddish communities. Likewise, he suggests that despite efforts at integration, "you couldn't help notice that we were kinda separate." There were a few interracial couples, but in general, families didn't allow young Black men like Thomas "go around with white girls." Black and Jewish parents brought their children together on the playground, but largely didn't socialize together outside of that. What's more, according to Thomas and several other Black Coopniks, most of the Black families lived physically apart from the rest of the community, on the top floors of the buildings.[61] In another oral history from the BAAHP, Brenda Beattie Neuman, who grew up at the same time as Thomas, recalled feeling isolated and unwelcome as one of only a dozen Black families of the nearly seven hundred in total. Excluded from ubiquitous community events like bar mitzvahs, weddings, and other social gatherings, she mocked Jewish residents' accounts of the houses as being "one big family." It was precisely this sort of "quiet" segregation, as Neuman called it, that made the Coops' racism all the more insidious.[62]

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[60] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century (Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America)* (Princeton University Press., 2006).
[61] Thomas Warner, Oral History, interview by Steven Payne, transcript, September 15, 2020, The Bronx African American History Project, Bronx County Historical Society.
[62] Brenda Beattie Neuman, Oral History.

In addition to the BAAHP's intervention into the Coops' racial past, former residents like Neuman have themselves responded to such nostalgic mischaracterizations. In 2003, Neuman addressed a letter to Michal Goldman responding to a work-in-progress screening of *At Home in Utopia* and its failures representing the stories of Black Coopniks. Neuman's first point was personal: as a reflection of Goldman's racial biases, she insufficiently credited Neuman's efforts in attaining National Landmark status for the house—the result of which allowed Goldman to unlock additional funding for the film. As for the film itself, Neuman denounced Goldman's depiction of one of the Coops' most outspoken Black members, Angie Dickerson, as "shallow," if even credible. "It would have been more appropriate and authentic to locate her children, nephews, brothers, sisters… to tell some Angie stories." Instead of seeking out more Black voices, both in the film and during the screening event prominent white Coopniks like Paul Rosenblum merely touted the statistic that the house let ten Black families live there. "To this very day their arrogance still prevails," Neuman exclaimed. "They used the African-American community as you are using the Landmark for your gains." More than historically irresponsible, Neuman accused the director that Goldman's choices were downright exploitative. When the context is broadened beyond the perspective of Jewish cooperators, nostalgic reminiscences of even the most apparently radical elements of the cooperative housing movement appear to be longing for a home that perhaps never existed for the Bronx's Black communities.

Conclusion

While the original membership of the Amalgamated and Sholem Aleichem were technically open to all applicants, there was little pretense that anyone but Eastern European Jews would live there. And despite the Coops' attempts, the pull of Jewish community challenged the possibility of any multiracial cooperative future. Indeed, these were housing

cooperatives attempting to provide decent conditions for immigrant workers who just years before were targeted by a nativist immigration law, and whose families escaped brutal oppression to ultimately reach the Bronx. How do we reconcile the nostalgic recollections of former cooperators for utopian community with the cooperatives' exclusionary, and at points exploitative, record? This raises key tensions about the nature of community more broadly. At the Sholem Aleichem, for example, it is likely that the depth of Yiddishist community catalyzed the house's ability to rally together and strike when the condition demanded it. But this depth of community also necessarily relied on exclusionary forms of membership. How do we disentangle the legacies of the original three Bronx cooperatives who were, by nature, exclusive, from the more obviously exploitative projects that would proceed to define the legacy of the cooperative movement? Was the contradiction fundamentally embedded in the nature of the cooperative project, or perhaps more a problem of scale? As witnessed in the example of Roger Starr, the cooperatives' legacy can be mobilized in service of destructive political ends. While the tensions arising from the cooperatives' history are difficult to reconcile, they offer critical considerations for how we remember—and how we make use of those memories—today.

Conclusion
Towards Diasporic Cooperative Futures

In 1912, upon completion of the grand, 10-story Beaux-Arts building that would house the offices of the *Forward*, Abraham Cahan proudly proclaimed to his readers, "The Forward Building will be the home of the Jewish socialist movement."[1] It rivaled the steel-framed feats lining "Newspaper Row," the home of *The World*, *The Tribune*, and *The Times*. But instead of an ornate copper dome, the Forward Building's edifice was adorned with the faces of Marx, Engels, and Lasalle, while a bright, electrified sign beamed the paper's name in Yiddish down on the tenements below. At a moment when Jewish workers' real homes were in an altogether sorry state, the figurative home provided by the paper and its modern "citadel" would have to suffice, even if Cahan's highly political proclamation likewise erased the growing heterogeneity of the Jewish labor movement. But the role of such a building could only extend so

Figure 4. Forward Building. *Forward*, December 4, 1921, The National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University.

[1] Sam Kestenbaum, "The Forward Building: From Labor Citadel to Luxury Condos," *The Forward*, April 16, 2016.

far. What the Forward building could only have done figuratively in 1912, the Bronx cooperatives had by 1927 done quite literally.

Ironically, the building that once housed the infamous Jewish workers' paper now advertises studio apartments going for $1.7 million, catering to people Henri Lefebvre would have called "the Olympians of the new bourgeois aristocracy." These rich housing speculators that balloon prices in New York City's market do not so much "inhabit" the city, as Lefebvre observed, but rather "go from castle to castle, commanding a fleet or a country or a yacht. They are everywhere and nowhere."[2] Yet the financialization of urban real estate that has accelerated this trend was only just beginning when Lefevbre wrote those words in 1968. Indeed, the ongoing commodification of housing has produced a real estate industry and an obedient state apparatus responsible for crises transcending mere "affordability." New York has more unhoused people today than at its peak during the Great Depression, and the number of affordable rental units in the city has only continued to decline over the past two decades.[3] Real estate speculation has driven up rents while tenants are devoid of even the most basic protections. The Lower East Side has seen many changes since its days as the capital of the Jewish labor movement. The neighborhood witnessed postwar influxes in Black and Puerto Rican residents, the emergence of a distinct bohemian East Village in the 1960s, and more recent waves of gentrification, translating the neighborhood's radical immigrant history into real estate value.[4] As Sam Kestenbaum wrote in 2016, the Forward building had gone "from labor citadel to luxury

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[2] Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings On Cities* (Cambridge, Mass, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 159.

[3] David J. Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (London ; New York: Verso, 2016), 1; New York City Comptroller, "The Gap Is Still Growing: New York City's Continuing Housing Affordability Challenge" (New York City Government, September 25, 2019).

[4] Lara Belkind, "Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 22.

condos."[5] This glaring irony reminds us of the stark realities of New York's present housing crisis. It serves as testament to the dire need for creative solutions to the ongoing struggle for decent, affordable, and socially-integrated housing—and to the unfortunate reality that, in pursuit of this struggle nearly a century later, not much has changed.

Yet there is another historical irony that offers a more generative path forward. For all its fraught history, the Amalgamated cooperative of today might serve as a useful guide towards imagining a multiracial cooperative future. The combination of its "hardy" longevity and the exhaustiveness of suburban white flight from the neighborhood means that, more recently, the Amalgamated has become a diverse, middle-income cooperative. Coverage of the cooperative from 2003 describes a community meeting in which a placard with the words "We are a United Nations" was placed on the wall. According to the article, "the sign listed more than 20 nations that people from the building called their original home, among them Mexico, Korea, Russia, Ireland and Thailand."[6] The house now hosts an international food night where neighbors share dishes from their own culinary traditions with the rest of the community. As most remaining Jewish residents pass away or move on, its original cultural traditions are replaced by new ones. Ed Yaker, the Amalgamted's in-house historian, is optimistic that this new generation of cooperators will improve upon the dreams of its Jewish pioneers. "For them," explained Yaker, "its not just a stepping stone to the suburbs."[7]

This raises several fundamental tensions crucial to the history of the Bronx cooperatives. No matter the mission of their founders, these utopian experiments in worker housing paradoxically helped usher their immigrant Jewish residents towards upward mobility and

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[5] Kestenbaum, "The Forward Building."
[6] Christopher John Farah, "For a Working-Class Dream, a New Day," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2003, sec. New York.
[7] Julie Cooper, "Next Year in the Bronx."

assimilation that may have ultimately distanced them from the radical politics that brought them there. But even before they attained such upward mobility, this tension was embedded in the original "revolution of the Lower East Side" that kicked off this journey. What were the implications of the fact this primary revolution meant leaving their neighborhood altogether? To what extent was this fundamentally different than the subsequent move their children's generation would make to the suburbs? And at what point did the very nature of Jewish enclaves become exclusionary?

This thesis cannot provide an answer to all of these questions, but I would like to suggest that the Bronx cooperatives—in all their diverse political forms—might speak to the tenuous power and possibility embedded in the process of building home in diaspora. In their book *Powers of Diaspora*, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin assert the value of conceiving of diaspora not as a condition of rootless, exilic victimhood, but rather "as a positive *resource* in the necessary rethinking of models of polity in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state system and ideal."[8] Indeed, across Jewish history, the condition of diaspora is in fact more "normal" than the relatively recent project of the modern nation-state. For the Boyarins, the condition of diaspora offers an expansive imagination of hybrid cultural identities and alternative political organizations. Indeed, a core tenet of the Jewish Bund was the concept of *Doikayt*, literally "hereness" in Yiddish. It manifested as a sort of radical cosmopolitanism, a commitment to making home wherever they found themselves. As the Boyarins explain, "Within this process of repeated removal and regrounding, Jewish culture has elaborated a range of absolutely indispensable technologies of cultural transformation."[9] Cooperative housing became one of

[8] Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.
[9] Boyarin and Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*, 5.

them. Yet today we find ourselves awash in transhistorical accounts deeming the Jewish state as the inevitable "telos" of Jewish history. As the political scientist Julie Cohen claims, "many people today share this view: to solve "the Jewish question," the nation-state is the only viable answer."[10] The presumed inevitability of the Jewish state as the solution to the "problem" of Jewish diaspora obscures this vital period of interwar Jewish history in which this was still a highly contested question. Irrespective of the presence (or lack thereof) of Zionists within the communities, the Bronx cooperatives represent the possibilities of embracing Jewish diaspora as a valuable cultural and political framework.

Contrary to Yaker's account, the cooperative's pioneers did not all view the move to the Bronx as merely "a stepping stone to the suburbs." In fact, for many cooperators, the move to the Bronx was perhaps less about the place they were leaving and more about becoming rooted in the homes they were about to create. Herman Liebman spoke to this question in a 1930 edition of the Amalgamated bulletin:

> We, of the Wandering Tribes, whose remote ancestors have crossed the Orient, and whose more recent forebears have traversed all of Europe; whose fathers crossed the Atlantic and settled in Brownsville; and most of us who moved from Ludlow Street to the Bronx and finally here—we, the gypsies of the world, are we really capable of feeling the genuine sense of "Home" so natural to all other people on earth?[11]

To which he resoundingly answered, "Yes, we can!" Recounting the Amalgamated's pioneers, Amalgamated President Hyman Bass echoed Liebman's sentiments in the 1977 anniversary journal. "From the start we knew we owned our homes; we were not tenants. We knew our residence was not transitory. We planted our roots firmly and strove to maintain the high quality of our homes, our surrounding area, our community."[12] The housing cooperative emerged for

[10] Hannah Mayne, "Interview with Julie Cooper," University of Toronto, *Entangled Worlds*, February 21, 2019.
[11] Liebman, "Rooms or Homes – Which?"
[12] "The United Workers Cooperative Colony 50th Anniversary Reunion Journal."

Jewish workers as what the Boyarins called a "technology of cultural transformation," providing the space and resources in which cooperators could fashion and refashion their hybrid American Jewish identities. They found home in more than the Bronx geography: it also looked like art or study, striking or singing Yiddish songs. Despite the whims of leaders like Liebman, the Bronx cooperatives were simultaneously bases from which to invest in their broader Bronx communities, embodying that Bundist value of *doikayt*. Indeed, as the Bronx native Vivian Gornick explained, "they were a culture, these New York Jewish Communists, a nation without a country, but for a brief moment, a generation, they did have land of their own: two square blocks in the Bronx."[13]

When presented with nostalgic narratives of the early Bronx cooperatives from Chapter 3, how might we reconcile the seeming incommensurability between the longing for diasporic community and a racist legacy that was at best limiting, and at worst, oppressive? How do we embrace the longing for living spaces that offer more than just shelter, while extending its imagined community beyond its narrowly defined origins? Svetlana Boym suggests a way forward. She proposes that "the imperative of a contemporary nostalgic is to be homesick and sick of home—occasionally at the same time."[14] Just as it is insufficient to accept nostalgic reminiscences at face value, it is equally insufficient to dispense with them outright. The direction of history is neither one of linear decline nor linear progression. For as she rightly suggests, "nostalgia, in my view, is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities

[13] Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 53.
[14] Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents."18.

of the future."[15] In yet another historical irony, the reactionary urbanist Roger Starr, of all people, sheds light on this issue in the 1977 memorial journal:

> It is possible that we will collectively see a turn, once again, to an understanding of, and belief in, the values of social democracy. Such a twist in the road will require many and deep changes in public attitudes, probably themselves reflective of public events. But the change will also be helped by refreshing our recollection… of the cooperative housing movement in New York…[16]

Revitalizing our memory of the Bronx cooperatives might serve as an invitation into the sense of possibility these Jewish workers accessed. More than a condition, diaspora is also a perspective. For the Bronx cooperators, this was the perspective that the politics and cultures on offer by mainstream America in the early 20th century were insufficient. It was a perspective that afforded them a radical sense of possibility, of forging life otherwise, of intervening into their conditions and building homes and communities unimaginable to the average commentator. Of the necessity to sing in, and about, the dark times.

Yet of course, these perspectives were also limited. The cooperatives were not immune from the perversions of privilege and entitlement they ultimately took on by nature of living there; nor from the limitations of forging community enclaves more broadly. The task at hand demands a necessarily *expansive* recollection—beyond the movement's leaders and beneficiaries. For, if wielded correctly, nostalgia can be an active political tool. Prospective nostalgia can transform dead ends into unrealized possibilities. It "precludes the restoration of the past," instead drawing inspiration towards new and better futures.[17] It is an invitation into the confidence to intervene in historical circumstance as these communal experiments did, but with the hindsight of and humility toward their critical flaws. A 2004 exhibit at the Museum of the

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[15] Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents.", 8.
[16] Starr, "Cooperative Housing Today: Observations on a Golden Anniversary," 41.
[17] Ibid., 16.

City of New York exploring the legacies of all three Bronx cooperatives took up this challenge. As the museum's president rightly questioned, "why is it considered utopian to want good housing for working-class people with room for art and libraries and the vision to be racially integrated?"[18] Recent calls to revisit the history of the Bronx cooperatives affirm that these questions are more timely than ever.[19] But these calls also demand a critical eye to the inevitable challenges the Bronx cooperators faced. Only by demystifying the cooperatives' history can we mobilize its lessons towards a truly cooperative future.

[18] Nadine Brozan, "A Historical Look Back At Working-Class Housing," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2004, sec. Real Estate.

[19] Erik Forman, "How Unions Can Solve the Housing Crisis," *In These Times* (Chicago, United States: Institute for Public Affairs, Inc., October 2018); Avi Garelick and Andrew Schustek, "The Rise and Fall of the Coops," Jewish Currents, December 7, 2020.

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