

The Block

Herb Goro

With an Introduction by Theodore W. Kheel





■ Preface

The relationship between the American Foundation on Automation and Employment and this photographic essay began when Herb Goro became interested in doing a study of workers displaced by automation. I knew that Herb was a photographer whose skill with a lens was comparable to the most talented writer's skill with a pen. But I was not sure at our first meeting that the human drama which results from the interaction of people and technology could be isolated by the camera. Statistics and sociological analysis do not make interesting photographs. The complexity of the relationship between jobs and technological change is great. A factory which introduces a computer might actually hire more employees, while another, unable to afford expensive capital investment, is forced to close and put its employees on the street.

After talking with Herb Goro, I felt that his own sensitivity to the human condition was captured in the photographs he showed me. His interest in exploring the lives of particular people in a technological age convinced me that there might be a natural alliance between our foundation and this project, and we became a sponsor of this book. It has proved a rewarding relationship, and the product of Herb Goro's sensitive talent is a portrait of life for some New Yorkers that suggests to us how far we all have to go to create a decent world. It makes clear the magnitude of the job to be done if we are to bring all the people into full participation in the society.

The American Foundation on Automation and Employment which I now head was created by labor and management in 1962 to help ease the problems workers

faced as the result of automation. At that time in this nation's history unemployment had soared to more than 6 percent of the work force. But even this alarmingly high rate failed to indicate how serious the problem was. The general rate hid the extraordinarily high figures that existed in some areas while there were labor shortages in others. We learned that the rate of joblessness among blacks was generally twice that among whites. For black teenagers unemployment ran at four times the average rate, and for black female youngsters the figure doubled once again.

At the time, in 1962, the country was properly alarmed. A villain was needed to explain why the economy had failed to provide work for all those able to take jobs, and automation was a likely target. The president of the AFL-CIO, George Meany, called automation a "curse." Others came to the defense of technological advance. As too often happens, the battle was joined with a slogan and a catchword. Important issues, which are inevitably complex, were lost. One group of experts called for fiscal measures to stimulate the economy in order to create new jobs. Others looked to remedies for structural unemployment and argued the need to deal with each group among the jobless in specific ways. Both approaches had merit—neither was a complete solution.

The country embarked on a course of economic adjustment, including a reduction in taxes enacted in 1964, to spur consumer purchasing power and thereby reduce unemployment. The rate of joblessness dropped sharply. Indeed, in the mid 1960's shortages of labor began to appear and wages and prices started to rise. By 1969 inflation soon became epi-

demic, and the new aim of federal policy was to curb the economy without making it recede, which stabilized prices without drastically decreasing employment levels.

Through this period of adjustment in the 1960's, one essential fact became increasingly evident. Our affluent society helped those who needed help the least. Persons with skills and education and experience could keep pace with the new technology. Those who were untrained, uneducated and unskilled were left behind. Because many of those who are least prepared to compete in a technological economy are black, the lack of a job exacerbated the sense of exclusion from full participation in the society, and aggravated the divisions between races in the United States.

It is ironic that at this time jobs were available. The development of new industries and a startling demand for white-collar and professional workers had created serious labor shortages in many areas. Employers sought job applicants, and their search was unrewarded. But they were not looking for everyone. They needed persons with the right skills to match the existing jobs.

The answer seemed obvious: job training. But it was not such a simple matter. Job training must be for jobs that exist. The person must be able to get to the job cheaply before he can take it. The training must be for a job that pays a decent wage, one that offers dignity and opportunity for advancement. People have to find out where to get training; they must be able to get the time and money to stay with the training course, and they want a method of evaluating whether they are benefiting from the training.

By now training programs have been initiated by the federal government, state

and local governments, companies, unions and community groups in every section of the country. It is too early to evaluate the results.

But in the course of the 1960's we came to understand more about what it means to be excluded from society. We saw what it does to a person to be without a job, without anything to do. We have learned what it means to live in overcrowded and dilapidated housing, to go to schools that don't teach, to play in parks that are resident headquarters for dope pushers, to grow up in neighborhoods that bear no resemblance to the technological wonders exhibited on the television screen. The problem of jobs and all these other problems are interconnected. That might, by now, be a truism—but it is an important truth as well. We know that no one area can be singled out for solution with any hope that it will be the key to the others. But we should realize too that our common goal must be full participation for everyone, that the best solution to the terrible problems of race and poverty in this country is to find the means to offer everyone a role—a good job that provides dignity and security and a chance to move up the ladder. And the path to putting people to work starts with a relevant educational system, training programs that are effective, and government services that work for all sections of the city.

These are the themes Herb Goro went to the East Bronx to explore. From 1968 to 1969 he lived with the people he photographed. He learned their problems. Many turned to him for help. He talked with them and listened to them, and the record of these conversations indicates that as they became friends the tape recorder was not an intruder, nor an obstacle to candor. The stories of the people

Goro lived with are reported here exactly as they were told to him, edited only for minor aids to reading. The result is a perceptive and poignant portrait of urban life among the very poor.

This book shows us very clearly and dramatically the extent of the problem—the difficulty of providing municipal services and economic opportunity to all the people in a way that creates a sense of pride in community and a sense that civil servants are part of a common effort rather than a common enemy; the problems faced by young, black, urban Americans in finding their way through a complicated technological age; the problem of finding the pride and dignity and privacy which are indispensable elements of life. These issues are portrayed with a candor that is rare. Herb Goro's pictures and the tapes of his conversations with these people are free of the romanticism that pervades too much of our discussion of contemporary problems. The people whose stories are told here face seemingly insurmountable obstacles in joining society. Their plight is an indictment of the rest of us, an indication that our institutions and our leaders have not responded adequately to remedy injustice and bring opportunity to all the people.

But this book makes clear also that the situation is not hopeless. John Smith has talents that could be developed. He has pride that should be nurtured. He has ambitions which could be given a chance. Suwon Jones has an understanding of the world that seems to surpass that of many of her more educated and advantaged neighbors. She has a vision of the kind of life she would like. She has a keen perception of her own condition. The others who tell their stories, including the teachers and the social workers, the

policemen, the Sanitation men, do not reveal any simplistic or facile solutions to the problem. There will always be tensions in a society as diverse as ours. There will always be strains in building a community. But our tradition and our heritage teaches that this very diversity is the source of our strength. It is our hope that this book indicates the depths of the problem and the challenge to solve it. For in the end the aim of our foundation—the aim of all of us as individuals—is to find a way to build a better community in which all can participate and prosper.

Theodore W. Kheel

■ The Block Worker

I'm a senior block worker here for a neighborhood community corporation. In this community as such, there is no community. I mean that the people . . . it seems to be just a stopping point . . . it's just a point where they stop over and just find a place to live—for a temporary type of period.

The people come here from the Deep South, and from other places—Puerto Rico—and they stop here and they accept these fantastically exorbitant rents to landlords. They accept bad living standards. They accept health problems and things like this. This is true, but the reason for this is because they have no choice. A ghetto has a cycle. A slum has a cycle. It's here one day and gone the next. When I say this, I mean you find there's certain areas in the Bronx that at one time were lily-white middle-income areas. Now the epitome of a slum. It just shows you the evolution. Where I work on Washington Avenue, at one time, twenty years ago, it was a beautiful neighborhood. Now it's a slum. The conditions here are terrible.

You have money-grabbing landlords that refuse to keep any kind of maintenance on the buildings. You have a tenant that's uneducated as far as their rights as a tenant are concerned. You have people that are wards of the state, that are on welfare, and pay these rents 'cause rent money is not coming from their pockets. It's like a whole vicious cycle that goes on here.

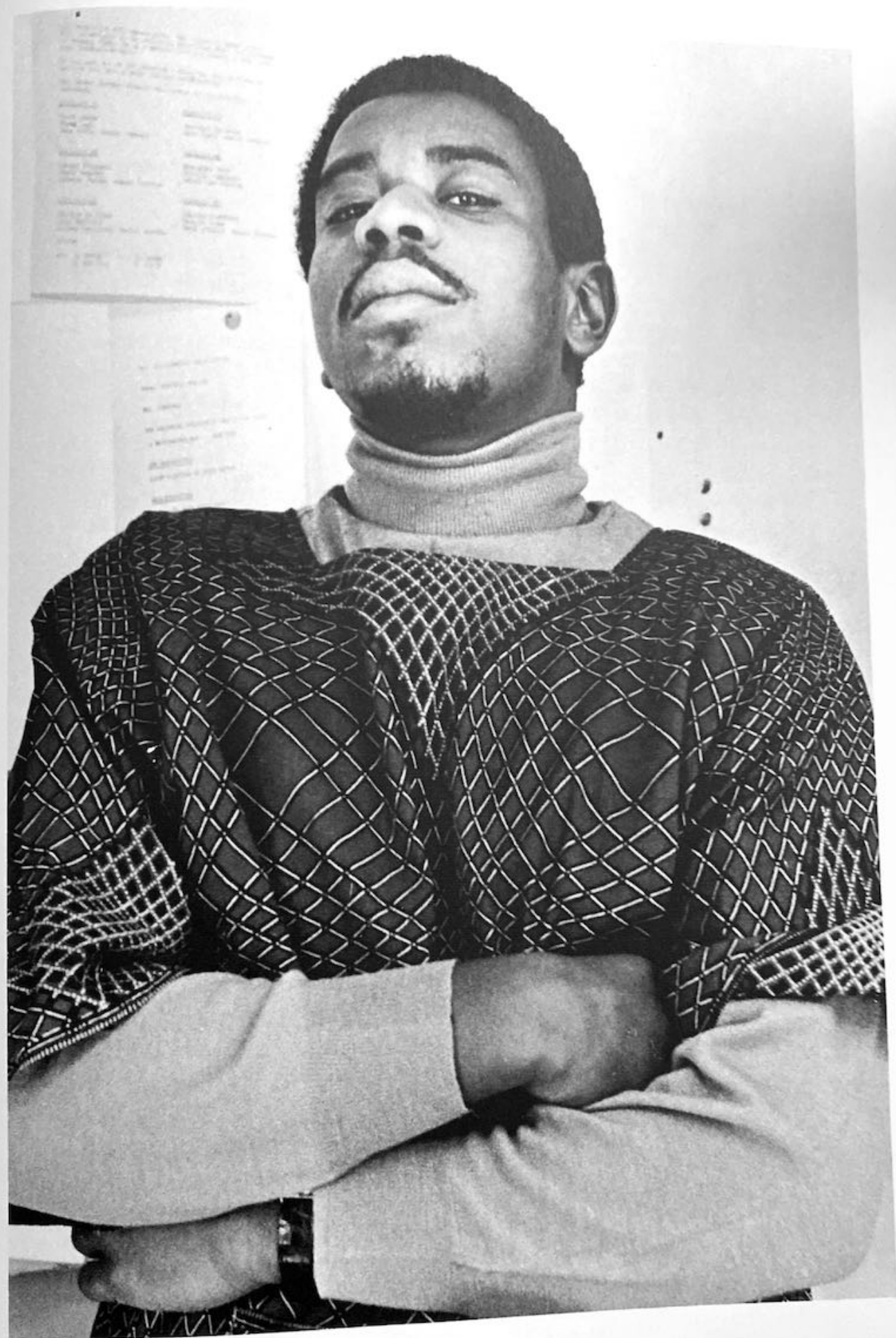
You've heard the expression many times—"trapped in the ghetto." This is quite true. You find that people come here, see an apartment, and expect to pay a certain amount of rent for this

apartment. What happens is, the person enters the apartment, begins living there. Once he begins living there, he finds many existing problems, like rats and mice, and leaks, ceilings falling in, leaky faucets, the whole thing. And the total expense is on the tenant. In a slum building there is hardly any overhead. A landlord only makes a repair. The only way a landlord will make a repair is if the tenant refuses to stay in that apartment or refuses to pay his rent. And that is the only time a landlord will make a repair.

The Puerto Rican person who comes from Puerto Rico is basically not aware of what substandard housing is. He is not aware that he's being exploited by the landlord. And this goes for a black person migrating here from the South. It's basically the same thing. They're not really sure that they're being exploited and used in a really vicious manner.

I think that the housing problem is like where the kid grows up with rats jumping all over his bed, waking up in the middle of the night and something's crawling on his foot; lifts the covers up, man, and there it is—a ten- or twelve-inch rat, and don't tell me it doesn't happen. I know people that became so accustomed to things of this nature that you ask them, "Do you have rats or mice in your house?" and they answer like, "Yeah. Only one comes in my bedroom at night." Like nothing's happening. Only one. So like, you know, for yourself, for one rat to come in my house would be for me to pack my things and leave. But for these people, they became so exposed and so, like I say, people on the whole adapt.

The Sanitation Department is sort of like an organization that is not particularly interested in what the ghetto looks like. These men feel that they do their



job. They do enough by just picking up the garbage in these communities. They just don't feel that these garbage-filled lots are their problem. Because we have reported these conditions to the Sanitation Department, and they have done nothing about it, and we've tried to get a few people behind us to do something about it. We've requested more pickups per day, but they claim to be short-handed on men and equipment.

Like I told you, it's no community thing here. People are just stopping over. For some reason, people in this community will move from one building on one block into another building on another block, and it's just as bad.

You see, this breaks the community spirit. We get certain people together on a certain block, and they are together as a community and as a group, projecting the same idealism, you know, and wanting the same things done. Now people move in and out of this block, and there's a turnover, and when you go back six months later there's different people living in the same apartment. Just like that, and this breaks the community thing.

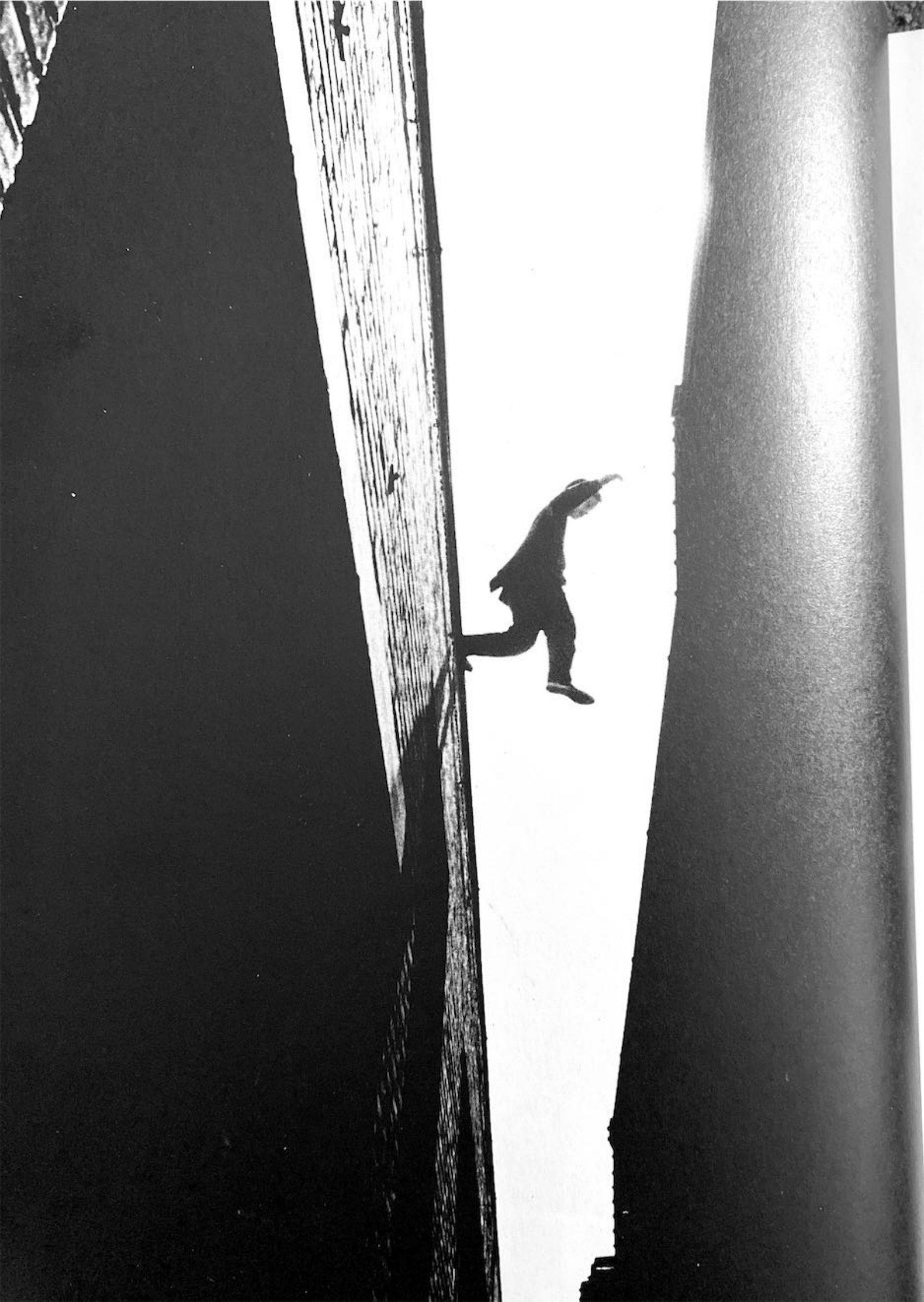
Also, you have a problem with the garbage in the lot, because the garbage in the lot breeds health problems—and health problems in a large perspective—breeds rats, mice, roaches, and it also breeds other types of health problems, wherein you can never get any fresh air or this sort of thing. It's sort of like the decaying stink of garbage that lies decaying in this lot. And these fumes constantly seep in through your window, you know, in the summertime in 90-degree weather. It's just constantly decaying, night and day. You're going to get sick.

Like I said to you, these are people that have migrated and immigrated from

Puerto Rico and the South, and they are not aware that you just can't throw a bag of garbage out of the window. In some instances the people just don't care. In some instances they give the garbage to the kid, and he throws it out the hallway window, and he sits there for about fifteen, twenty minutes, and he comes back upstairs with an empty pail, and his mother doesn't know the difference. This kid probably has seen an old wino in the building doing the same thing, so he figures why shouldn't he do it. And this type of thing, this is what a young kid in the ghetto is exposed to.

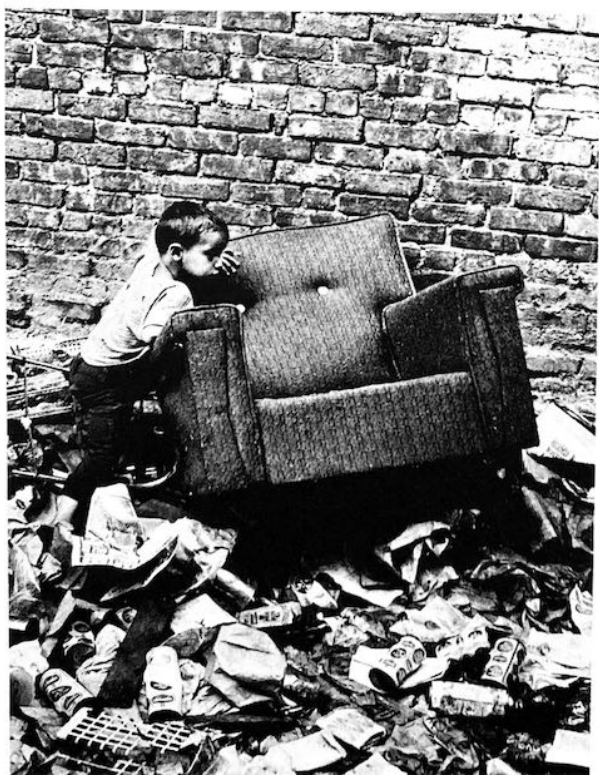
The cycle of a slum is an amazing thing. It never stands still. In the Bronx the slums move a little quicker than in Manhattan, because in Manhattan you have a community spirit, as I said, and in Brooklyn and in all the other boroughs you have some sort of community spirit going on and inspiration that people stick together. But in the Bronx, the slum will be here on 174th Street in 1975 and in 1985 it will be on 184th Street; and down on 174th Street it may just be through with—you know, just everything condemned—or it may be a rehabilitation process, whereby they'll be moving these very same white people back into this community, and once more the cycle starts over. It's a vicious cycle.

The only thing that I can say that will benefit black people and Puerto Rican people is that there should be a quota and ratio system in the housing, wherein they will have a certain percentage of whites and a certain percent of blacks, which will help curtail this type of thing.



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■ The Sanitation Worker

These people here, they have no pride in their children. Their kids run around half naked while they can go buy wine. They have a filthy neighborhood because after we clean it who puts the dirt on the street, in the lots, us or them? If they want to go out and work and have the things that we have, the things they're envious of, why don't they go out and work instead of staying home on welfare? They're bigger and stronger than I'll ever be, some of 'em, but yet I don't see them working.

That's the whole neighborhood.

There are more family people here. We get along with all these people here, and talk to them, you know? And like more or less we understand them. We get along. You know, there's no conflict between us. We don't actually have any racial disorder between us. We get along very good. We understand each other, but they have their point of view. They figure in life they want to lay around and do nothing. We figure as workers we want to work. Actually I don't feel like I should go and collect unemployment. I can't. I might have a pride to put up in this world but I can't see the idea of me hanging around and doing nothing, just drinking, and throwing cans and just littering the whole neighborhood. Each one of us has two jobs. For the things that we have today, the material things, the home, the car, the family life, the education, the clothing—we work for this. I work here for eight hours a day. I work some place else for four or five hours a day, five days a week.

Nobody in this world ever gave me nothing except my mother. She gave me life. Nobody gave me nothing. I work for what I get. Show me these people out

here today that are working. Show me the work that they do—and education, they discriminate against education. My family were poor when they came to this country. They were immigrants. They weren't born and raised here. They came here. They worked. They sent me to school. They made sure I went to school. They sent me to a Catholic high school where they paid fifteen dollars a month. They didn't buy fifteen dollars worth of wine, fifteen dollars worth of stereo set, fifteen dollars worth of anything else. They sent me to school so that I could take the test to be a garbage man. But they worked. I worked. Nobody gave me nothing. These people here, "Give me this, give me that, I have it coming." If they have all of this coming, when I was a child, didn't I have it coming? I waited for a new suit at Easter. When my brother grew out of it I got it. That was my new suit. Nobody gave me nothing. Used to irritate me something terrible. We had clothes being passed down to us when we were younger from our fathers and brothers, but we saw how they tried not to believe in this welfare. I mean when it's Depression and things like that, it's something else. But to live like this here, I can't see people living like this. I don't care how bad off you are, if you got any pride in the world you will go out there and work. Not so far as themselves, more so for their kids, to bring them up in this world and to have a better education, a better viewpoint in life. We went to school and got educated in order to take a test like this here so you become a Sanitation man; you don't have to be Sanitation—cops, any kind of civil service job in this world.

I just don't understand it. Them letting their kids run around in the street and just disregarding everything they have. I

mean, would you actually live in this kind of condition over here? You wouldn't live in there. You couldn't because why would you bring any kids into this neighborhood? All right. Some people over here, I seen them, they are pretty clean, insofar as some of these here supers. They are good. They are clean, but it makes those clean people look dirty. I tell you the truth, I feel so sorry for these little kids that are brought into this world. What are they brought into this world for? They have nothing to live towards in life, unless they are sent out to be educated—their parents are smart enough and try to go out and work and give them what they could, and get them out. That's the only way I could see to get any place, because there's got to be some kind of change.

Believe me, the political world and the government in this world over here today, it stinks. In plain English, it stinks. It does not worry about the people of the United States. They're only worrying about the people on the other side. The people on the other side ain't going to put no butter or bread on our table when we're down and out, believe me. I mean people in general, in all the other countries, that actually this country, insofar as them, our allies, and all of them, even if they're not our allies, we support them, and then we be discriminated by them, we're being thrown down the drain by them. Give it to the people like us, that live in this country, who want to come to this country, who live in this country as Americans, to enjoy democratic democracy in this world. I can't see that you got to give it to these other countries, when people in the street over here that are walking up and down, some of them, even crippled people, they're more needy than the goddam

people over there that don't give a damn. And if they're having any trouble over there, let them fight their own battles. Let them try to secure themselves just like we're trying to secure ourselves. They're not even worried about their people, the hell with them. Let us worry about our own people over here, that live here. All right. After we take care of our own home front, then if you got to take care of the other people, the people that want a democratic world and live peacefully in this world because actually it's just like a bunch of animals, these people. They only believe in fighting and taking what they could keep for themselves and, in other words, hold tight on everything and don't worry about nobody else. This is going on this way. There's too much greed in this world. Nobody worries about the next guy. If people were more friendly and get along in life, and we could live with each other. I'm not trying to believe on the basis of Communism. I don't believe in Communism. I'm strictly democrat. I like to be free. I don't believe in anybody telling me what to do. I do what I want to do as a working man. My wife works, my kids work. I believe in work. Nothing comes easy in this world. You've got to work to enjoy something. You can't take it easy, because I can never enjoy something that comes easy. Even if I was a rich man I wouldn't be able to take life easy. I think I'd be a nervous wreck standing around. I would like to work. I don't know if everybody's like me, but as far as I'm concerned, as an individual, I believe in work. My kids are working. I brought them up to work. I brought them up for an education. I'm sending my daughter to college. It's going to cost me money, that's why we're all working and trying to send everybody through college. It's a sacrifice,

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but we love to eat and I love to have the food on the table, and I love to live clean. I hate to live in dirt.

I try to help around this neighborhood, try to do my best, but you see some of these people just don't understand. You go up and talk to them, and you tell 'em, "You keep the place clean, we'll keep it just as clean as you, and there will be no dirt around." If in the event you find anybody around here that throws something, you should tell 'em. Tell 'em like this, "You going to live in this house? How can you come downstairs from an apartment and smell all that stuff or even breathe it up on the fourth floor." You actually got to live in this dirt. I was speaking to a woman on 172nd Street. She says, "Would you do me a favor, pick up this here?" Well, I says, "Honey, I've been picking up that lot over there in that corner actually almost every day or every other day, and it seems to always get dirty." And there's another individual around the corner, I don't like to mention any names. Him I told to put out more cans. They got to end up giving these people tickets. If they don't have ample cans for the people to put their garbage in, and if that don't help, and they still have it dirty over there, then actually the mayor or somebody in this city should come down here and talk to these people, or somebody that's their own kind should come over and talk to them and let them learn, not only today you clean up, you clean up every day in order to live in a better neighborhood. You cannot live in a good neighborhood if you don't keep it clean. The filth—you could make a rich person's house look filthy if there's garbage all around.

I think I got a wonderful job. There's nothing bad about my job. I don't mind

cleaning up. You can't pinpoint it down to certain people. It's just like everywhere else. There's some people that are very good people, but say some of them are married and they don't have no husband or some of them, they're not married and living with somebody else, it's like that there. But, well, I can pinpoint it down to about 20 percent are clean, you get the other 80 percent that just don't give a damn. So you can't expect these 20 percent of people to live in cleanliness and you got the 80 percent that's always dirtying up. Now, you see these people that like to drink around corners, they could get that can, just walk over to the garbage can and throw it in. That's not hard, to pick up a can if you're finished drinking beer, and put it in the can. It makes it easy for them, makes it easy for us, it makes it easy for the super, and the neighborhood will be clean.

I mean you can't expect anything to be clean if you say, well, the Department of Sanitation is not picking up. Now, we can't afford to actually pick up this neighborhood as we go along, and sweeping and pick up, and sweeping. We will never finish our work. There isn't enough hours in the day to do your job, actually. There isn't enough men on the job and I know that Lindsay ain't going to hire any more men to put any more salary with the burden they have in the city. Well, there's not exactly a shortage of men insofar as the work. But to go back and start to clean up and sweep the floor and then put it in cans and then pick up, it's a lot of work in a neighborhood like this here. Now, you get some other neighborhoods that guys are fortunate they're working in it. It isn't as bad as over here. They sweep a little bit up over there, but we pick up our own sweepings. We sweep

around the thing where we could get at it and pick it up but it's every day—constantly garbage on the floor. In a way it discourages you, because you're over there, you clean the place for them, trying to see that they live in a decent place, at least something clean, that they could walk in a house and not have to hold their nose, but they should worry about themselves because I feel that to me as an individual, I love to stay clean. I don't even want to eat with my dirty hands. I have to eat lunch with my work clothes on, but when I get out of here I go home and shower up and stay in cleanliness. These people should feel that way.

Maybe they feel the misfortune in life that they were given a raw deal, but I don't think they were, because when the Irish had a raw deal, the Jewish had the raw deal, the Italians had the raw deal, everybody, and furthermore, the people in this world that should have the biggest raw deal are the Indians and they still got a raw deal today. So I shouldn't say that these people should open up their mouth, 'cause they should thank God that they come over in this United States and collect their welfare. Years ago when we had Depression we had to go through hell to try and get a little welfare and we used to go out and work and break our back and we didn't get nothing for nothing. Nothing came easy to us . . . listen, everybody's got to go through life with a heart failure. Even Jesus Christ on a cross went through life that sacrificed His life and everything. That's the way I look at it. Everybody can live better in this world if they learn to live clean and understand each other. It'd be a better world to live in. That's all I have to say.

