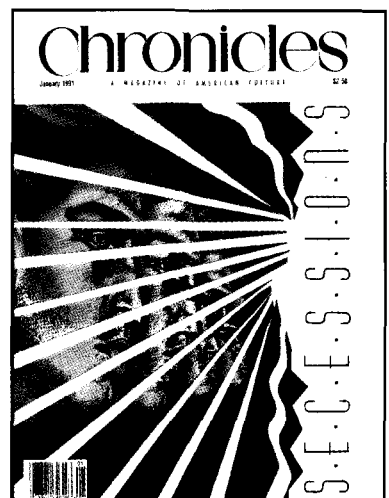


# New York vs. New York

by Bill Kauffman

*“The feeling between this city and the hayseeds . . . is every bit as bitter as the feelings between the North and South before the War. . . . Why, I know a lot of men in my district who would like nothin’ better than to go out gunnin’ for hayseeds.”*

—George Washington Plunkitt  
Tammany Hall, 1905



Plunkitt lived in the days before garbage scows, Tawana Brawley, Nelson Rockefeller, radioactive waste, and the decimation of local government. In the Upstate-Downstate marriage, Plunkitt's was the Era of Good Feelings.

Sectional enmity in New York used to be served with a wink and a smile. They were slickers, we were appleknockers; they were swells, we were yokels. Stanley Walker of the *New York Herald Tribune* could call Upstaters "earthbound clodhoppers, with inferiority complexes dating from a boyhood passed in shoveling out the barnyard," and no great offense was taken.

Upstaters knew their history back then; every schoolchild could recite the glories of his region. We gave birth to women's suffrage, the Liberty Party, Mormonism, spiritualism, Anti-Masonry, and the Oneida community. Mantics and kooks and visionaries—Jemima Wilkinson and the Fox Sisters and Frederick Douglass—took root in our soil. Shanty Irishmen built the Erie Canal; Gerritt Smith bought John Brown his guns.

At the great junctures in American history, Upstate had acted nobly, Downstate ignobly. Our patriots consecrated the Revolution with blood, while Tories and cowards sought haven in Manhattan. After the war, Downstate money interests rammed the new Constitution through, over the protests of the farmers and artisans who had shouldered the muskets. (The rustics possessed a "zeal for liberty," shuddered Federalist Richard Morris.)

The marvelous idea of divorce—of the two New Yorks—was first advanced at our ratifying convention in 1788. Ten states had already assented to the Constitution, but New York, led by the "Rough Hewer," shoemaker's apprentice Abraham Yates, Jr., held out. Downstate Federalists resorted to threat: If New York did not ratify, its largest city would split off and join the

Union anyway. To our everlasting regret, several Upstate delegates caved in, and we entered the United States as one.

By 1861, the City had turned disunionist. Unwilling to offend "our aggrieved brethren of the slave states," doughface Mayor Fernando Wood, a Breckinridge man, proposed to take New York City out of New York State—and the United States—and declare independence. No principle was involved, just good old filthy lucre: Wood wanted to preserve the Southern trade. Typically, New York City hoped to profit from war while avoiding the fighting.

Wood's trial balloon was punctured, and over the next century not even William Randolph Hearst could set it aloft. Upstate blocked Hearst from the governorship, as it did Ed Koch in 1982, after hizzoner imprudently told *Playboy*: "This rural America thing—I'm telling you, it's a joke." Behind the pastoral façade lurked a truly nightmarish reality, almost David Lynchian: "wasting time in a pickup truck when you have to drive 20 miles to buy a gingham dress or a Sears, Roebuck suit."

Not exactly Jackie Mason, but still, a pretty harmless jest. Rural York, alas, had lost its sense of humor. We rejected Koch for that agrarian knight, Mario Cuomo.

Governor Cuomo's speechwriters have since beaten the "family of New York" trope into tripe. How is an Elba onion farmer kin to Jackie Onassis or the Reverend Al Sharpton or Billy Joel? David Leavitt, Manhattan's golden boy of letters (and an NEA grantee, natch), looks beyond the Hudson and sees "a scrubbed, manicured neighborhood. . . . The music is by Wayne Newton, the paintings are by Norman Rockwell, and sex takes place only between married men and women in beds at night."

The details are all wrong, of course, except maybe for Norman Rockwell and the bed, but that's to be expected of Leavitt, who knows less about the real America than I do about the nightlife of subsidized Bohemians and trust-fund trash. No

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matter. This is how Greenwich Village sees us, and this is why some sharp Upstate pol, maybe a demagogue and maybe not, will one day tap into the populist potential and try to set this house on fire. Our preamble to battle could come from William Jennings Bryan's Cross of Gold speech: "Our war is not a war of conquest. We are fighting in the defense of our homes, our families, and posterity. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been disregarded; we have begged, and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer; we petition no more. We defy them."

The train of abuses and usurpations snakes into eternity. We are taxed to subsidize their squalid subway system, their welfare industry, and those artistic expressions deemed pleasing by culture czar Kitty Carlisle. (Perhaps Annie Sprinkle playing the home version of *To Tell the Truth*?) Rural and working-class folks are harassed by an array of gun laws, 55 m.p.h. paternalism, and extortionate regressive levies on everything from fishing to foodstuffs.

The vitality is gone up here; no ferment, no foment, no nothing. Or so it appeared to Governor Cuomo, who seriously overplayed his hand and is facing an incipient rural rebellion.

In 1989, the governor determined to locate a low-level nuclear waste dump in rural, money-poor Allegany or Cortland County. Most of New York's waste is generated in Westchester County and around the City, but, well, you know: mustn't rouse the righteous dander of Joseph Papp, and E.L. Doctorow and Christie Brinkley. It'd be so much easier to steal farmland in our godforsaken region. The *Times* won't make a peep.

Imagine Cuomo's surprise when his likeness was hung in effigy across Western New York. Protesters—not shaggy college kids but natives, many with roots generations deep—have kept state inspectors off the threatened property. Raucous rallies recall Whiskey Rebels and Daniel Shays. Guitar slingers who'd take Hank Williams, Jr., over Joan Baez any day sing rousing songs. Top of the pops: "Allegany County is full of nasty boys / Shotguns is their favorite toys."

The anti-nuke firestorm is whipping up a great new cloud of anti-urbanism. Most Upstaters, at least in my neck of the woods, have never even been to New York City. Nevertheless, as Norman Mailer has said, "the good farmers and small-town workers of New York State rather detest us." And why not? You send your murderers and howling Son of Sam lunatics to Attica, and now you want to bury your nuclear waste in our woodlands. Like a boorish suitor who has already been to the mountaintop, you don't even flatter us into submission. You just seize the land by eminent domain, all the while crowing about how Green thou art. (The upper-middle-class environmentalist groups, so exercised over plastic trash bags and snowmobiles, are shamefully silent on the rape of Allegany. Might they want plum appointments in the Cuomo administration of 1993?)

The anti-Cuomo, anti-NYC sentiment is diffuse and unchanneled. It has no public outlet. The parties, the chain papers, the TV and radio stations are owned by Manhattan corporations: The New York establishment really is one big happy family. Agrarian and small-town dissent embarrasses Upstate elites, who have been to college and met people from all over the world and learned never to trust their own judgment or those of undegreed, untraveled neighbors.

This past November, the Republicans ran for governor a Manhattan millionaire economist named Pierre Rinfret, chosen for his bulging purse. Rinfret yammered about the death penalty and the fool drug war, as though serial killers and white

powder are what ails us. He called his Upstate campaign trips "a waste of cash." He squandered the rural vote with a remarkable proposal that counties bid for the privilege of *not* hosting waste dumps—thus ensuring that our poorest, most verdurous, least populated shires would become the Metropolis's latrine. Westchester would go scot-free, while Allegany would be forever despoiled. Despairing Yorkers cried that the Cuomo-Rinfret contest proved that the system no longer works, though I suspect it proved just the opposite: the system by which Cities and Money keep us in vassalage works all too well.

So what? some of my landmen say. Subjection is inevitable. David Harum, the cracker-barrel Yorker of a 19th-century regional novel, philosophized, "A reasonable amount of fleas is good for a dog—they keep him f'm broodin' on bein' a dog."

The problem is, Upstate has become a miserable whipped cur. We haven't elected one of our own governors since 1920. (The cousin-marrier of Hyde Park doesn't count.) We last elected a senator in 1958. We last had a *candidate* for governor in 1954. Estonia has more influence in Moscow than we do in Albany. (At least they've let us keep our accents.)

As the republican ideal dims, We are becoming more like Them. Henry Clune's fine unknown novel *Six O'Clock Casual* (1960) describes an Upstate hamlet in which the prominent men gleefully loot their patrimony. A native daughter, returned from New York City, discovers nothing but sickness and cupidity in her hometown. At novel's end, she again flees to the city, which is at least frank in its corruption.

Mr. Clune will turn 101 in February, and for all his pessimism he remains in the village of Scottsville, just outside of Rochester. He tried New York City once or twice, but opted to cultivate a literary career in hardscrabble local ground. He explained: "I longed for Main Street and the friendly nod, the warm greeting, the buttonholing by this, that, and the other passer-by. I wanted to be where I knew the folks. . . . Rochester becomes, not the small center around which the world revolves, but almost the world itself."

Clune is sadly unlaureled, but he has lived a life richer than a thousand PEN benefits. We are a "culturally undernourished hinterland," according to Norman Mailer, and while Upstaters do exhibit a deplorable ignorance of their heritage, I'll gladly pit Edmund Wilson against Alfred Kazin, William Kennedy against Jimmy Breslin, John Gardner against Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates against any *New Yorker* miniaturist, and, in the historical novelist category, Walter Edmonds against Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Face it: New York City has hit its cultural nadir. The magnet that once drew William Dean Howells now repels us with the subsidized juvenilia of Karen Finley. (And what does that say about the decline of their Midwest matrix?) Free spirits, Jack Kerouacs cruising jazz clubs, are long gone. The underground has a factitious, sham quality. New York City's two punk celebrities were typical: David Byrne was a RISDE brat and Joey Ramone has a rich psychiatrist mother. By contrast, Buffalo's best punk band, the Enemies, was led by a swimming-pool cleaner and a cabbie.

The dark-eyed poet of the 60's demimonde, Lou Reed, now finds Manhattan unlivable. "I've really got a lucky life," he sings, with "my writing, my motorcycle, and my wife." And his house in New Jersey. Rank and File, an incendiary cowpunk band out of Seattle by way of Austin, visited after-midnight NYC and didn't like it one bit.

Did you ever see a sheep in a porkpie hat?  
Ever seen a lemming dressed all in black?  
You might have been there but I'll tell you just in case  
Just take a walk down St. Mark's Place.

Rank and File were angry populists, probably harboring all sorts of phobias. The bumpkin bewildered by the din and pageantry of Gotham is a stock character in Upstate/Downstate literature. Stanley Walker, in his jocular 1935 essay, walked a mile in our shoes: "Every other citizen is either a pickpocket or a sybarite. . . . The City reeks with Jews, Catholics, atheists, communists, nudists, Republicans, Public Enemies, chow dogs, Rolls-Royces, and Heywood Broun."

The conceit is that anyone who bridles at Downstate imperialism is a rube, a racist, a redneck, an anti-Semite. What wonderful weapons with which to stifle debate: Submit, Upstater, or face the Hate Crime tribunal!

So where do we turn, O Lord, where do we turn? To Norman Mailer, of course, whose 1969 mayoral campaign is a fulgent star in our pitch black night.

"Power to the Neighborhoods!" was Mailer's slogan. He wanted to abolish the present city government and permit blocks, tracts, sections to manage their own affairs. SoHo, Harlem, Bensonhurst: each neighborhood would be responsible for its own welfare, trash pickup, policing, etc. He also wanted to cut Upstate loose, to end our "marriage of misery, incompatibility, and abominable old quarrels."

Mailer averred that he was to the left of the liberals and to the right of the conservatives: wisdom's place! He got clobbered, but not before diagnosing the modern malady: "The style of New York life has shifted since the Second World War (along with the rest of American cities) from a scene of local neighborhoods and personalities to a large dull impersonal style of life which deadens us with its architecture, its highways, its abstract welfare, and its bureaucratic reflex to look for government solutions which come into the city from without (and do not work) . . . Our condition is spiritless. We wait for abstract impersonal powers to save us, we despise the abstractness of those powers, we loathe ourselves for our own apathy." Has any candidate in postwar America been as eloquent?

Mailer's essay, "An Instrument for the City," reprinted in *Essential Errands*, is a brilliant and shamefully neglected decentralist manifesto. If New Yorkers had listened to Mailer, Paul Goodman, and Dorothy Day instead of John Lindsay, Abe Beame, and Ed Koch, perhaps we'd be friends.

Two years later, Bella Abzug picked up the statehood ball. The floppy-hatted harridan—who had opposed the high-testosterone Mailer candidacy—raged against Upstate "appleknockers" who did not understand the historical inevitability of a centralized welfare state run by Manhattan social workers. Abzug's plan was poorly designed: She wanted an urban state, without the buffers of Long Island and Westchester. (We don't want 'em either!)

Yet Abzug struck a nerve. Ambitious pols who thought they were too urban, too Jewish, too black to win statewide elections hopped on the statehood train. Brooklyn borough president Sebastian Leone took Bella one step further and called for an independent Brooklyn, asserting, "We've lived too long in the shadow of Manhattan." The Buffalo City Council passed a "good riddance" resolution. Petitions were circulated to force a citywide referendum to authorize the drafting of a new consti-

tution, the first step toward statehood. Liberal activists were reinvigorating the torpid American ideal of self-rule, and they were, justly, proud of themselves.

They were also naive. The hack city clerk rejected 20,000 of the 55,398 signatures they had collected. There would be no referendum. Governor Rockefeller and the *New York Times* proclaimed it a great triumph for unity, and secession died a prompt death.

(A similar fate will likely befall the separatist movement operating today on Staten Island. By far the smallest of New York's five boroughs, Staten Island gets stuck with 80 percent of the city's rubbish. "One man-one vote" rulings have nullified the borough's influence in city affairs, so fed-up islanders are crafting a charter for an independent City of Staten Island. The state legislature, dominated by antisecession slickers—why liberate your best garbage can?—will have the final say. Those who have ever depended on the kindness of politicians can predict the outcome.)

I suppose there is no reason for anyone outside of New York to care about our plight, but I'll take a stab at manufacturing "relevance." Division of New York is in the national interest because it would permit a new generation of Upstatesmen to take the stage. We did, after all, give America Martin Van Buren and Grover Cleveland. (With Millard Fillmore we'll take our mulligan.) Barber Conable, my congressman for many years, a man of republican virtue and rectitude, would have made a fine president. Democrats from Rochester and Syracuse are colorless, but the rural Democracy is populist, anti-bureaucracy, and Green. (In many cow counties, the Democrats are the anti-tax, anti-spending party.) Give us our own state and we just might give America another Bob Taft or William Jennings Bryan.

In mid-September, Batavians honored Major Philemon Tracy of the Sixth Georgia Infantry, the only Confederate officer buried in Northern soil during the War.

Tracy was a Macon, Georgia, boy who spent his summers in Batavia with his uncle, Judge Phineas Tracy. When Major Tracy was felled at Antietam, his uncle had the body smuggled north and interred without fanfare in our founders' cemetery. A century and a quarter later, local Civil War buffs, led by Don Burkel—whose printed cards describe his occupation as "Controversial Person"—decided to give Major Tracy a proper memorial.

Fifty or so Batavians paid their respects on a brisk Sunday morning. Reenactment soldiers, blue and gray, planted the stars and bars and stars and stripes in Tracy's dirt. Jefferson Davis made a brief speech. An adorable elementary schoolgirl read Mary Ashley Townsend's poem, "A Georgia Volunteer." The soldiers fired a volley. A bugler played "Taps."

As we left the cemetery, my dad and I talked about the Kauffmans in the Union army, privates all, farmkids who marched off to war. I felt proud of them even as I doubted the justness of suppressing the South. When I got home I performed an etiolated act of localism worthy of the 90's: I opened a beer, flopped on the couch, and watched the Buffalo Bills game on television.

The Bills are a respected team, finally, and Western New Yorkers are inspired in the days following a big win. Maybe, in some small way, these muscle-bound mercenaries are contributing to a revived regional patriotism. But Philemon Tracy's grave, its Confederate flag rippling in the September breeze, sent a loud and sure admonition to any romantic fools who might still entertain secessionist dreams: *Don't!*

# New England Against America

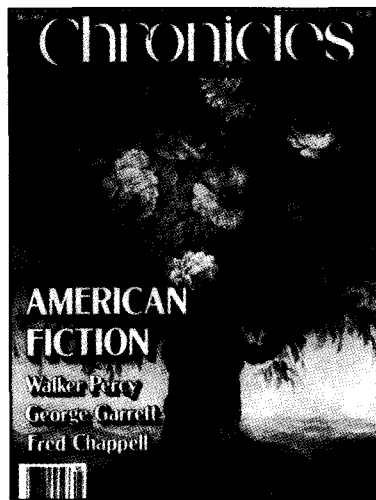
by Clyde Wilson

*“The fiction of Mr. Simms gave indication, we repeat, of genius, and that of no common order. Had he been even a Yankee, this genius would have been rendered immediately manifest to his countrymen, but unhappily (perhaps) he was a Southerner. . . . His book, therefore, depended entirely upon its own intrinsic value and resources, but with these it made its way in the end.”*

—Edgar Allan Poe

In the heroic effort to establish an American literature, intellect, and culture before the Civil War, the main line of tension was not between cosmopolitans and provincials, nor between classicists and romanticists. It was regional. But the primary regional dividing line was not drawn, as you may think, along the Appalachians (East vs. West), nor along the Potomac (North vs. South). Rather, it was at the Hudson River (New England vs. America).

This descriptive historical truth is now obscured by the fact that the New Englanders were successful in convincing much of posterity that they *were* American culture, a process that was assisted by their colonization of Manhattan during the antebellum period through such figures as Horace Greeley and William Cullen Bryant. Yet the lines of tension were clearly drawn and obvious to everybody at the time: on the one hand, moralistic, reformist, sentimental, pushy, genteel, devolved Puritan, transcendental New Englanders, eager to impose the supremely virtuous model of the closed communities of Massachusetts as the pattern not only for America but for all mankind; on the other hand, a more



leisurely and tolerant, openhanded, rural, frontier, traditional, Anglican, gentlemanly (not genteel) spirit that visualized the true American culture as arising from the open spaces South and West of the Hudson (or in the case of Melville, the seas). New York and Philadelphia were in many cultural respects closer to the South than to Boston, at least before the 1850's.

In the literary politics that characterized the antebellum period, a host of well-organized, industrious, mutually admiring New England scribblers pursued a totally ungenerous policy of self-aggrandizement, presenting themselves to the world as America and ignoring or slandering the rest of the country whenever it suited their purposes. After the Civil War, lacking any formal opposition, they had the field pretty much to themselves except for sporadic populist rumblings from the Midwest.

Anyone who will look at what passed for mainstream literary history and criticism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for instance, will find a host of second- and third-rate New England writers (Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Bancroft, Motley, and many others now justly forgotten) shamelessly celebrated as the perihelion of American letters, with only an occasional slighting reference to Poe or Melville. When Hawthorne appears it is in an interpretation sanitized to please New England schoolmarms of both sexes. It is little known (but true) that the present stature of Poe and Melville and understanding of Hawthorne (all of whom were outside the New England canon) rests upon the heroic efforts of a few scholars and critics in this century to correct, in part, the incredibly mean-spirited and petty Bostonian warp that was imposed on the evaluation of American literature after the Civil War.

It is also a fact that the success of the Bostonians in literary reputation was not matched by the quality of their contributions as measured in the perspective of the ages. American creative literature of the first rank was made almost entirely outside of the Boston-Cambridge ethos. Poe was a self-declared Southerner in perpetual combat all of his short career with the New England spirit; Melville a New York Democrat who could write verse in celebration of the ancient honor

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