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A BRONX TALE BETWEEN DESOLATION AND HOPE

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In November, Bronx voters will be pivotal in deciding whether the old and corrupt Democratic machine will prevail in New York City, or whether a transformative socialist politics is possible under sclerotic capitalism. Fifty-three percent of Bronx voters ranked Andrew Cuomo as their first choice in the June 2025 Democratic mayoral primary, by far the highest percentage among the five New York City boroughs.

Consider the paradox: During his tenure as New York State governor, Cuomo diverted hundreds of millions of dollars in funds meant for the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the United State's largest mass transit system. As a result, subway and bus services deteriorated considerably throughout the New York City metropolitan region.

Cuomo's high vote totals are a tribute to the staying power of the corrupt Democratic Party machine and to the passivity of an electorate traumatized by displacement, homelessness, crime, and every other imaginable social ill.

Still, hopeful signs have emerged. The winner of the Democratic mayoral primary, Zohran Mamdani, who received 34% of the vote in the Bronx, has not only proposed free subway service but also public grocery stores, which are much needed in the food deserts of the Bronx where it can be difficult to find a fresh head of lettuce.

The 2019 victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, whose district lies partly in the Bronx, was the previous most auspicious sign.

INDIFFERENCE AND INCARCERATION

Through civic action, and by exercising initiative in the communities in which they work and live, Bronx residents may yet rewrite the tale of their borough, a narrative quite different from those of the likes of New York Governor Kathy Hochul.

To Hochul, Bronx students might as well be nomads in the Kalahari Desert. In May 2024, Hochul attended the Milken Institute Global Conference in Beverly Hills to promote New York's investments in artificial intelligence at schools and universities. Michael Milken, who founded the Milken Institute in 1991, spent two years in prison for securities fraud, and was pardoned by President Trump in 2020.

At a conference technology panel, Hochul caused a stir by saying, "Right now we have young black kids growing up in the Bronx who don't know what the word 'computer' is."¹ Hochul later said that she "misspoke," which is what politicians often say when their language proves overly revealing.

¹ Looker, Rachel. "NY Governor Slammed for Saying Black Children Don't Know What Computers Are." BBC News (7 May 2024).

Beyond myopic, her words reveal, a pointed indifference to the Bronx, beset with crime, pollution and corruption, and especially to those Bronx residents for whom “the cell block has replaced the auction block.”²

Mass incarceration remains wasteful and yet lucrative in New York State, which between 2010 and 2020 earned 500 million dollars from its prisoners, most of whom were paid less than thirty three cents an hour.³ During that decade, it was rare for prison inmates to obtain a college education because Congress had ended their eligibility for Pell grants in 1994.

BACKGROUND OF THE CRISIS

For far too long, the powerful have dictated the tale of the Bronx. Between 1948 and 1972, the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed middle class neighborhoods with high concentrations of Puerto Ricans and African Americans, displacing sixty thousand residents. Banks and insurance companies redlined neighborhoods with 10% or more African American and Puerto Rican residents, denying their residents home loans and fire insurance.⁴

During the seventies, fires destroyed 80% of the housing in the South Bronx, displacing 250,000 of its residents. Under such circumstances, it was hard to foster a sense of community or memory of place.

To this day the Bronx remains the poorest county in New York State, saddled with power plants, transportation hubs, waste transfer facilities, and the highest incidence of asthma of any county in the United States.

Long a poster child for political corruption, the Bronx has spawned a breed of politicians who create non-profits that are ostensibly meant to assist Bronx residents, but which primarily serve as patronage mills for the friends and relatives of those politicians.

To give but one example, Bronx state senator Pedro Espada, Jr., who served for a year as New York Senate Majority leader, spent five years in prison for diverting, for personal use, federal funds that were meant for the non-profit Soundview Health Center, which Espada helped found. His son, former Bronx assemblyman Pedro Gauthier Espada, was sentenced to six months in prison for his role in the scheme while he was Soundview’s Director of Environmental and head of its compliance committee.

Outside money has made the Bronx Democratic Party a bastion of mediocrity. In the most expensive congressional campaign in U.S. history, AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) spent fourteen and a half million dollars on behalf of George Latimer who defeated the progressive one-term Bronx Congressman Jamaal Bowman.

Bronx congressman Ritchie Torres has received one and a half million dollars and all-expenses-paid trips to Israel from AIPAC and other pro-Israel lobby groups. Torres touts himself as the first openly gay African American and Latino congressman, possibly because his association with rightwing donors leaves little else to recommend him.

A New York State Department analysis conducted in May 2025 found that 106,903 residents in Torres’ Fifteenth Congressional District would become uninsured should the estimated one trillion dollars in

² Yusuf Komunyakaa, qtd. in Chris Hedges, *The World As It Is*. New York: Nation Books, 2009: 47.

³ “Abolishing Slavery in New York.” The Legal Aid Society. <https://legalaidnyc.org/take-action/campaigns/abolishing-slavery-in-new-york/>

⁴ Syedda, Qudsiya. “A Split City: The Destruction of the South Bronx.” *Environmental Justice in America*.

<https://ejhistory.com/cross-bronx-expressway>

Medicaid cuts be enacted and that the cuts would have a negative fiscal impact amounting to \$814,373,343 in the 15th congressional district.⁵

President Trump signed the bill enacting those cuts on July 4, 2025. It's against that backdrop that Bronx and all New York City voters will make their mayoral choice in November.

NOTE

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⁵ "NY Healthcare Impacts By Congressional District."
<https://sharegisny.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/03f4a73b91df459d9089e1603b9dc7eb>