

Perlin, R. (2024) *Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York*. Atlantic Monthly Press

Review by Joshua B. Freeman

Three decades ago, when I was writing *Working-Class New York*, I was acutely aware of my linguistic deficiencies and the obstacle they presented. My rudimentary French and German were of little use in understanding a working class with a huge Spanish-speaking component and growing numbers of Chinese, Haitian Creole, and other non-English language speakers. I envied Lizabeth Cohen, who in *Making a New Deal* was able to take advantage of foreign-language Chicago newspapers that had been translated by the WPA. I even applied for an NEH grant to study Spanish, and got laughed off the court. So, I muddled through, recognizing the thinness of my portrait of immigrant workers.

Writing that book today, things would be different, and not so different. A huge number of Spanish-language publications and documents are now digitalized and can be instantly translated on-line. The word processing program with which I am writing this review will translate over 40 languages; specialized programs can translate many more. But there are far more languages spoken in New York today than 30 years ago, at least 700. According to Ross Perlin, author of *Language City*, Gotham is now “the most linguistically diverse city in the history of the world” (p. 5). Translation software won’t help with many of these languages, which not only lack an on-line presence but have no dictionaries of any kind, no grammatical guides, limited if any documentation, and, in some cases, no written language. Social scientists and historians seeking to understand the people who speak these languages still face big challenges.

Perlin is a linguist, interested, above all, in how small, threatened languages can be preserved. The core of his book consists of portraits of six New Yorkers who are trying to maintain their native tongues or the languages of their forebearers that they belatedly learned: Seke, spoken in just five villages in northern Nepal; Wakhi, native to a “remote high-mountain region where Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China converge” (171); Yiddish, which is actually thriving among Hasidic Jews, but has all but died out among secular Jews and as a literary language; N’ko, an alphabet created in 1949 for West African languages that lacked writing; Nahautl, an ancient language still spoken by 1.6 million people in central Mexico; and Lenape, the original language in what is now New York, which, according to Perlin, has just one native speaker left. Surrounding these engaging profiles is a wealth of information about linguistic communities in New York, most

in outer borough neighborhoods little known outside of the city (or, for that matter, to residents of better-off parts of the city).

Perlin does not define his subject as the working class, but for the most part that's what it is. The people he writes about are nurses, care-givers, street vendors, construction workers, landscapers, Uber drivers, restaurant workers, and grocery clerks. Speaking languages from home villages and regions, most also know a larger language, like Spanish or Russian or Hindi, as well as English (and in many cases a couple more languages beyond that). They are, Perlin claims, the norm, not the oddity; "the archetypal New Yorker is . . . a working-class, multilingual immigrant (p. 21)." Perlin mentions in passing some efforts by speakers of endangered languages to organize on the job, like Los Deliveristas Unidos, which represents app-based delivery workers, but he gives more attention to the social organizations, religious institutions, and educational efforts in their communities, especially groups devoted to teaching, documenting, and preserving languages, overwhelmingly a grass-roots movement.

Language City is full of "who knows." Who knew that the area around Park Hill in Staten Island is home to more Liberians than anyplace outside of Liberia, and that they speak seventeen separate languages? Who knew that a third of "French" residents in post-World War II New York were Bretons who spoke their own Celtic language and dominated jobs in "French" restaurants? Who knew that there is a Kichwa-language radio station in the Bronx? Who knew that the borough also has a mosque where a version of Romani spoken by Macedonian Roma remains alive?

Recent years have seen an outpouring of excellent scholarship on particular ethnic communities in New York: Koreans, Dominicans, Chinese, Haitians, and others. But no book gives as rich a sense of the sheer complexity and diversity of working-class New York as *Language City*. Reading it is a humbling experience to those who think they know the city well.

Some of the implications of Perlin's extraordinary work for working-class studies are clear. Connections between the local and the global are all over *Language City*. As Perlin shows, the extraordinary linguistic diversity of New York stems from the disruptive power of capitalism, as it penetrates the last remote and isolated regions of the world: communities high up towering mountain ranges, or tucked into isolated valleys, or for some other reason previously unconnected to major trade and transport routes. With roads, cell phones, DVDs, and cheap air transportation, New York City is now not so far from just about anywhere. The hyperlocal and the transnational are one and the same, as in the case of the significant percentage of the 700 global Seke speakers who live in one building in Brooklyn and remain in constant touch with their co-linguists in Nepal. The working class in New York, and at this point in most U.S. cities, cannot be studied on its own, isolated from the distant places that shape its language, values, thinking, and priorities on an ongoing basis.

Perlin offers only glimpses of how extreme linguistic diversity may impact working-class cohesion. On the one hand, shared language can create a certain insularity, an inward-looking orientation, in communities, especially if there is a sense of being part of a beleaguered group. On the other hand, many small linguistic groups adopt or develop a lingua franca that enables them to speak with groups from nearby parts of the world, living or working in proximity in New York. To Perlin's mixed feelings, the children of immigrants tend to quickly feel more at home in those languages or in English than in the languages of their parents. Perlin argues that the very diversity of languages in immigrant New York, and the lack of any one dominant language, contributes to the generally harmonious relations that can be found there, even among groups that elsewhere are in conflict. "Linguistic and cultural differences stabilize, even harmonize, the neighborhood. It can be a home for so many groups in part because it is a homeland for none of them, no one's turf (p. 16)."

Perlin episodically plunges deep into linguistic ideas and the widely varying structures of language. Not every reader will want to go there with him. But for anyone interested in the working class, this is a pleasurable, provocative, eye-opening read.

Reviewer Bio:

Joshua Freeman is Professor Emeritus of History at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Besides *Working-Class New York* and other books, he is the author of *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*. He has a forthcoming book from U. of Chicago Press titled *Garden Apartments: The History of a Low-Rent Utopia*.