



# CRABS IN A BUCKET



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**How the ruling class spreads  
chaos in public housing**

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**We'll start with a story that's familiar to anyone living in public housing in New York City.** One afternoon, we were in Red Hook Houses, a NYCHA development in Brooklyn that the city government and real estate companies have been plotting to privatize. We were there with two residents to talk to their neighbors about the neglect they're dealing with, and how it's all part of the government's plan to get rid of public housing and hand the keys over to private real estate companies.

On one floor, we met a resident of nearly 20 years in the development who had a laundry list of repair issues in her home: a gas outage, broken floor tiles, a broken trash chute, and much more. We met some of her neighbors, who all had similar problems. These residents also described issues from another neighbor on their floor, a young guy who was banging on doors at night, yelling and cursing at people, and generally being a menace.

As we're talking about him, all of a sudden shouting starts from his apartment between him and his relative. An older guy we're talking to immediately goes over and knocks on their door, asking if everything is okay. Seconds after the door opens, we see our friend get grabbed and pulled into the apartment. Shouting and fighting starts. We run over to break it up. The two of them are trading punches and grappling. The guy who started the fight, the one who was yelling at his relative, gets the crap beat out of him. He starts to cool down, his face all bloody. It's immediately clear that he has untreated mental illness and is in the middle of an episode.



*Red Hook Houses, the largest NYCHA development in Brooklyn*

Principled and righteous actions are much harder to spread than negative ones. The payoff in the short-term is spiritual, not material. It also puts us in conflict against a host of uglies, starting with the government and the police, who will never accept a form of authority other than their own. Then there's the self-appointed “community leaders” working for nonprofits, who circle peoples' struggles like vultures and make a career out of “activism.” And maybe the most immediate threat is with the people acting out the chaos, who will decide to lash out against any effort to advance revolutionary changes in their neighborhood.

We see no way around these conflicts. They're already in our midst. But rather than allow them to play out for generations into the future, the matter at hand is to come together to stop the chaos, and to unite against the common enemy and the system responsible for it. All this is the nature and functioning of capitalism: divide the people into classes, and set up the mechanisms to keep a small minority on top and the people at the bottom in dire straits, day after day, century after century.

**A new authority is needed among the half a million people living in public housing, and throughout our entire society.** We either step out and fight to make this a reality, or we let the chaos reign. Frantz Fanon, a revolutionary and intellectual who was part of Algeria's war of independence from France, wrote in 1961: “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.” The choice is ours.



*Frantz Fanon speaking at the All African People's Conference (1958)*

# How do we stop the chaos?

In our experience, people who step out to fight NYCHA and the real estate suits can quickly get demoralized by the apathy they perceive in others. “I’m the only one who cares about this” becomes the mentality, or “I don’t want to be the only one fighting this all on my own.” **When we start to try to climb out of the present nightmare, people can quickly tear each other down. It’s like crabs in a bucket, but only if we let it be.**

Something important happened that day we were in Red Hook. A resident stepped in to mediate a problem, without ignoring it and without calling the police himself. We need to spread this kind of mentality and behavior: intervene in the conflicts, relying only on each other.

We need to withhold judgment and contempt towards the people acting out who need help and treatment. We should tell people to quit it with the *bochinche*, or the destructive gossip. We do NYCHA and the suits a favor every time we spread distrust and disdain towards each other.

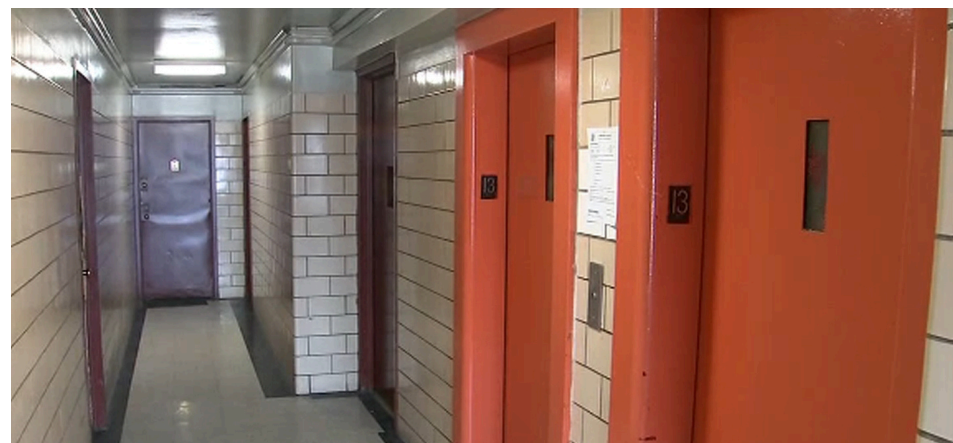


Family photos from Jayah Arnett's "My Projects Runway"

Our friend tells him, pointing a finger between his eyes: don't talk that way to your family, and don't give other residents any problems. He agrees, and they shake hands.

Seconds later, a group of eight cops materialize out of nowhere. They crowd around the young guy's apartment and start banging on his door. We know this goes one of two ways: he cooperates, or he starts bugging out again and the situation gets way worse. Every year, the NYPD guns down people who are in mental health crisis in their homes and out in the street. After the situation had already cooled down, they came in to escalate. The young guy starts getting agitated again, but thankfully that stops after we talk to him more. The cops leave.

Everyone on the floor starts talking about how crazy the people are here. How this used to be a quiet building. How there's homeless people sleeping in their stairwell. How there's drug dealing and smoking in the hallway. How there's piss in the elevator on their way to work in the morning. How women get harassed and assaulted, trapped living with and around their abusers. How they all just want to live in peace, not dealing with all these nightmares. **When we point out to the person who called the police that it made the situation worse, explaining that the guy could've been shot dead in front of all of us, she replies, "So what if they shot him?"**



This kind of thing happens every day, in thousands of NYCHA buildings across the city. Residents live in constant fear and aggravation towards their neighbors. Their landlord, the biggest slumlord in NYC, leaves their apartments in hazardous, inhumane conditions. Real estate suits circle the block like sharks smelling blood, pushing out long-time business owners and pricing out long-time residents to gentrify their neighborhoods. Police stalk the streets but offer no solutions to the beefs that boil over into shootings and assaults. **This leads people to one conclusion: time to get the hell out of the projects.** Black and Latino families that have been in NYC for generations are already leaving in droves. But many also have nowhere to go, and leaving is easier said than done.

Every day this all plays out, there are also NYCHA's housing managers who come in to work and ignore residents' problems. Superintendents sit on their asses, collecting bribes and making sure repairs don't get done. The heads of NYCHA, people raking in over \$200,000 a year in salaries, commute into offices from their million-dollar homes in Long Island and Staten Island. And the real estate suits, the people plotting to take over NYCHA properties, never set foot in the projects. They live in gated communities in Connecticut and Westchester. Their kids go to private schools. They have nannies, private chefs, country clubs, yacht clubs, and sex trafficking clubs (look up the Alexander brothers).



This brings us to the 2020s. Decades of neglect and mismanagement by NYCHA have taken a toll, as have decades of social conflicts. People are more reluctant than ever to stand with their neighbors against a common enemy. Privatization has arrived, with thousands of units already handed over to private property managers. Many residents don't even know this is happening, or don't believe something bad could happen to them because of it.

**Like a vampire at the door, private real estate is dangling empty promises of repairs and security, pushing residents to turn their backs on their neighbors, and beckoning for an invitation inside.**

Who has benefited the most from this arrangement? Follow the money, as always. For the ruling class, they've landed on a well-refined strategy of spreading a controlled burn in oppressed neighborhoods, keeping people pitted against each other, handing out drugs and smartphones to dull and distract the mind. They let conflicts fester. With every fistfight, every catcall, every overdose, every piece of garbage thrown out the window, it's another step towards urban cleansing. It's another generation of Black people thrown into displacement, or trapped in a neighborhood that's killing them. It's two circles of the same American Hell.



Public housing disinvestment wasn't just for the government to stabilize their grip on power. It also paved the way for federal programs like Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD), which are public-private schemes that have led to billions of dollars of windfalls for real estate companies. They swooped in to build over demolished projects, or take over the management of them.

The Ronald Reagan Era brought crack and budget slashes to public housing. Yet through the '80s, NYCHA developments often fared better than the surrounding neighborhood. Maintenance and management teams were still held to a high standard. Buildings still needed to be taken care of. Residents had annual reviews of their apartments, with repair issues thoroughly documented and addressed. Rules for tenants were enforced, which helped maintain some social stability. The positive social dynamic of residents looking out for each other couldn't be eliminated overnight. It had to be whittled away.

All of this got worse in the '90s and 2000s as the tourniquet tightened. **A vicious cycle set in: NYCHA and the federal government quit on maintaining buildings, so repair issues worsened. As the buildings started to fall apart, people started to treat them more like a dump.**

Crime and addiction fueled conflict and animosity between neighbors. OGs who kept an eye on the youngens and enforced certain rules got locked up, pushed out by gentrification, or became deeply cynical. Mothers and grandmothers, who were the only breadwinners and caregivers in many households, also bore the brunt of navigating the increasingly complex and punitive government welfare agencies. This included the spiraling nightmare of fighting NYCHA to make repairs in their homes, which started to become a job on its own.

**Real estate companies—armed with billions of dollars in capital and sweeping political influence—enact vicious social control to keep poor and oppressed people in their place.** They orchestrate optimal conditions for reaping profits through rent collections, property sales, and new construction. The slumlord playbook serves them well to minimize expenses and maximize what they can squeeze out of tenants. Government agencies do their bidding, keeping masses of people trapped in a cycle of unemployment, incarceration, and dependency on welfare services. It's all by design. And it's dialed in, with precision.

## The controlled burn

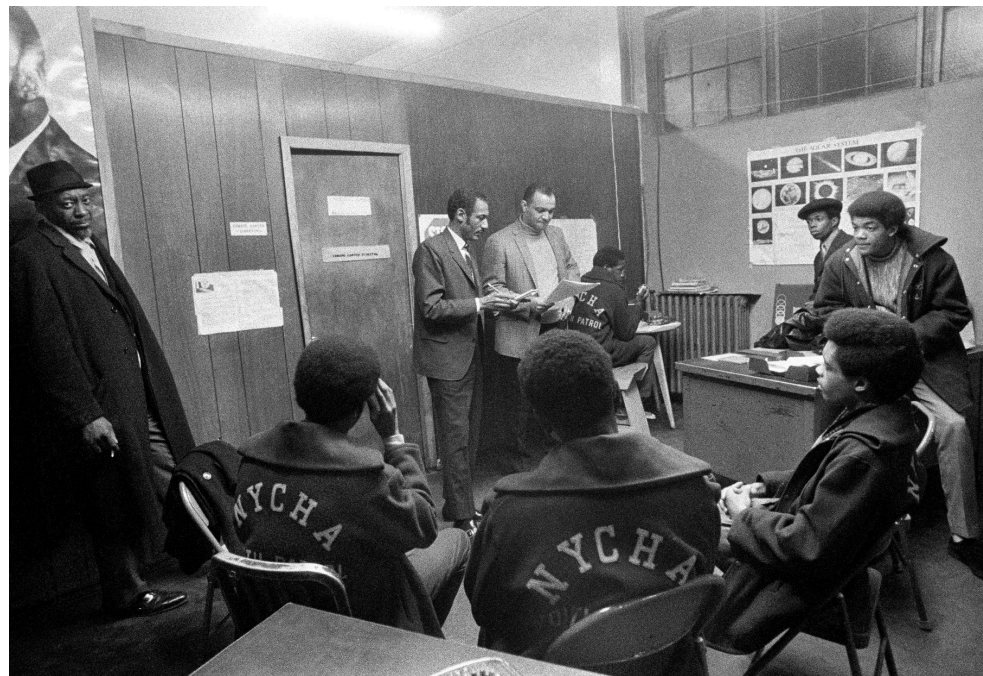
Older NYCHA residents share a universal experience of the changes in public housing over the years. Everyone will tell you how it used to be better. Superintendents took care of the buildings. You had tenant patrols. Community centers and parks kept kids busy. People looked out for each other. But somewhere along the way, things took a sharp turn for the worse.

There was a simple cause for the decline: the federal government launched a campaign of disinvestment and gutting public housing agencies across the US. This started with the Nixon administration in the wake of urban rebellions against police brutality and the oppression of Black people in the '60s and '70s. **Black people and Puerto Ricans posed the most serious threat the US ruling class had faced in decades, and they needed to be suppressed. Part of the answer was to sow chaos.**

The government allowed the drug trade to flourish and passed new laws to create a regime of mass incarceration. Stable employment also disappeared almost overnight due to factory jobs going overseas, in a process called deindustrialization. All of this had the effect of ripping apart the social fabric in cities, especially in Black neighborhoods.



*Queensbridge Houses in 1940*



*A NYCHA tenant patrol in Fort Greene in 1970*



*Queensbridge Houses in 1992*



*A vacant NYCHA apartment occupied by squatters in 2026*