These two questions are the starting point for this book and for the Museum of the City of New York’s exhibition *Activist New York* on which it is based. People have defined “activism”—a word first used in the early 20th century—in many ways. This book proposes a definition that offers a way of understanding social and political movements both past and present: Activism is what happens when ordinary people mobilize in hope of shaping their society’s future through collective public action.

That sentence helps us to grasp what connects a wide range of apparently unrelated events, efforts, and achievements, including ones that happened long before the word “activism” ever existed. The signing of a petition urging rulers to allow religious dissenters to live in peace; secret networks to help fugitive slaves reach freedom; strikes by laborers to pressure employers to grant higher pay, shorter hours, and the right to organize; protests by African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Asian Americans seeking access to economic opportunities, good health, and political power; the fight by women to obtain the vote and gain full social equality: these actions and many more count as activism, and the people who engaged in them, either briefly or over a lifetime, were and are activists.

New York City has been a special place in the history of activism, and its importance is the result of a distinctive and ever-changing mix of human factors. Those factors have included extremes of wealth and poverty as in few other places; the dynamic of diverse religious, ethnic, and racial groups competing for rights, resources, and power; and the continual mingling of newly arriving people and ideas in one of the world’s most densely crowded environments. The folksinger-activist Pete Seeger explained New York’s role as an incubator for
innovation by pointing to the
power of this diversity to encour-
age the exchange and creation of
ideas: “The extraordinary thing
that cities do... is to bring together
people who would not otherwise
have met each other.”

Also critical in explaining the
city’s activist history is the sheer
size of New York’s population as it
came the nation’s largest city
(1810), the world’s largest (1925),
and remained one of the top ten
even when Tokyo, Mexico City,
São Paulo, and others surpassed
it (1970s-90s). The rise of New
York as the nation’s center of
media, communications, and art
is another crucial factor, enabling
New Yorkers to broadcast their
expressions of protest and plans
for the future far beyond the
city’s borders.

New York has played an espe-
cially important role in the history
of leftist and liberal activism, a
byproduct of its history as a site
of labor conflict, a crossroads
for imported and homegrown
avant-garde ideas, a labora-
tory for experiments in using
government to tame social ills,
and a battleground for the rights
of women and minorities. But
activists can also fight to pre-
vent, or roll back, change instead
of promoting it, and these men
and women have also been part
of New York’s history. Whether
organizing to “protect” Protestant
society from Catholic immigrants
before the Civil War, speaking
and writing against the woman
suffrage movement during the
1910s, or forming neighbor-
hood groups to resist the forced
integration of local schools in
the 1960s, conservative New
Yorkers have used many of the
same strategies and tactics
embraced by those they have
opposed, though often with less
visibility and public celebration.
At the same time, New Yorkers
on the political left and center
have also sought to block or roll
back changes they have viewed
as negative (such as overde-
velopment, gentrification, and
pollution) through movements to
preserve landmarks, affordable
housing, and a healthy urban
environment.
Settled by Europeans in 1624 to earn income for Dutch investors, the town on Manhattan Island was blessed by a great natural harbor, access to rich natural resources, and the energy and ambition of generations of eager merchants, artisans, and laborers. It evolved steadily into North America’s “capital of capital,” the city where the pursuit of profit seemed more all-consuming and unashamed than anywhere else. In the 19th and early 20th centuries New Yorkers used these advantages to make their city the largest, busiest, and richest metropolis in the Western Hemisphere and then the world. The mid-20th century saw New York attain a position as the dominant global city, then suffer a period of declining fortunes and diminished resources in the 1970s before bouncing back as an acknowledged world center of finance and innovation in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Over those centuries, as this book will show, the nature of activism changed dramatically. In colonial Dutch New Amsterdam, and then English New York, those who challenged the status quo did so by petitioning authorities for special favors, defending themselves in court, or protesting in the streets. The American Revolution, itself a long episode of radical activism, created a new language of “inalienable natural rights.” (Although in New York, as elsewhere, propertied white males initially enjoyed the lion’s share of those rights to the exclusion of women, slaves, free African Americans, and the poor.) Additional “revolutions” that were part of the city’s booming 19th-century economic growth—an explosion of mass-produced books and newspapers pouring off printing presses, an expanding school system, a vigorous and competitive party politics, and a growing labor movement—excited other New Yorkers with the possibilities of claiming the rights inscribed in the Declaration of Independence as their own.

Many prosperous 19th-century merchants, financiers, professionals, and manufacturers funneled money into crusades to reform the city and the world. But the question of money—and who controlled it—also became a flashpoint for conflict as immigration, industrial work, and urban crowding generated a type of mass poverty never seen before in America. Tensions over divisions between wealthy, middle-class, and working-class people stimulated further efforts to reform the existing economic and political system. In the case of anarchist, socialist, and other left-wing activists, these tensions also inspired radical visions for overturning the system altogether and starting afresh, whether through peaceful or violent means.

In the 20th century the groundwork for activism shifted as some of the agendas of grassroots protesters—including demands for decent housing and protection of the safety, health, and bargaining rights of wage earners—became incorporated into the realities of the political system. In the first decades of the century Manhattan became home to the world’s most powerful and centralized business corporations. Partly in reaction to the power of expanding industrial capitalism—and then to the Depression that devastated the economy during the 1930s—New York City and State pioneered an unprecedented role for government involvement in the everyday lives of working people. This new urban liberalism satisfied some activist demands. But it also raised new expectations for further economic and political transformation, expectations that were sometimes rewarded and sometimes frustrated. In response, activists seeking new rights, freedoms, or opportunities—as well as those resisting change—found themselves trying to persuade, pressure, or fight government officials as well as business leaders in the city that had become the unofficial capital of the American economy.
Today, in a world where media and electronic communications have become far more decentralized, New York is able to retain its wide influence. It remains a place whose sophisticated, inventive, “edgy” activists still attract attention. As has been true for generations, the very geography of the city’s public spaces—its wide and straight avenues, open parks, squares, and bridges, and symbols like the Statue of Liberty and Wall Street—provide dramatic backdrops for marches, performances, and rallies. Unlike some other major American cities, New York affords ample elbow room in public spaces for such mass displays of popular democracy and for crowds of writers, broadcasters, and photographers to spread activist messages around the world.

At the same time, the city’s dense networks allow the hidden, daily work of activism to go forward. That work includes behind-the-scenes planning sessions, fundraising drives, door-to-door canvassing, mass mailings, meetings with officials, arguments with allies and rivals, hard compromises, and countless other tasks demanding energy, time, patience, dedication, and often courage. The pressures and opportunities influencing the lives of ordinary New Yorkers continue to propel them into activism to shape the future for themselves and others. In the words of Lower East Side writer-activist Richard Kostelanetz, “inhabiting a hothouse influences receptive people to be what they’ve not been before and would not otherwise be.”

All these patterns can be found at multiple moments in New York’s activist past. But the specifics of that history are not interchangeable any more than the lives of New Yorkers can be reduced to a two-dimensional stereotype. The experiences, emotions, frustrations, and accomplishments of different activists were profoundly shaped by the time and place they lived in and by the issues that drove them to act. Those details and those realities are what make the history of New York activism a living thing, today and into the future.