

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Joseph J. Varga, *Hell's Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City, 1894-1914*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-58367-348-5 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-58367-349-2 (cloth)

Despite recent efforts to efface its history through the practice of renaming, the area of mid-west Manhattan that real estate agents now call the Clinton Historic District (or even ‘Clinton Heights’) remains – to many existing residents and to the popular imagination at large – Hell’s Kitchen. Just how and why this moniker and all that it conjures have stuck is part of the story that Joseph Varga tells in *Hell's Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space*, a nuanced and theoretically-sophisticated history of the social relations and spatial imaginaries that produced this area in the turbulent decades from 1894 to 1914. Though this period of American urban history – the era of Progressive reform – has received considerable attention from historians, Varga adds a much-needed dimension to the discussion by engaging directly with critical spatial theory. The result is not just an eminently readable history of Hell’s Kitchen, but a fascinating example of how ‘taking space seriously’ can alter our historical understandings and perspectives in powerful ways.

Focusing on Hell’s Kitchen as a crucible of Progressive urban reform ideas and practices, Varga explores how a combination of “forces” – including the physical features of the area itself, the social relations of work and residence, the profit motives of employers and landlords, and outside perceptions of space and behavior by government officials and social reformers – had produced not just a particular kind of space (or kinds of spaces), but the very categories and prisms through which individuals (residents and reformers alike) apprehended and transformed these spaces. Space, for Varga, is both the outcome of capitalist processes of accumulation and the “primary ontological condition” of understanding and acting in the world. The generative

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nature of space can best be understood, he suggests, through an exploration of how space is *produced* – physically, socially, and symbolically.

Here Varga invokes Henri Lefebvre’s well-known spatial triad of lived, conceived, and perceived space – three ‘levels’ of space that intersect and interpenetrate each other. Lefebvre’s key theoretical breakthrough, argues Varga, lay with his notion of perceived or representational space – that which mediates (by both linking and de-linking) between conceived space (the abstract space of power and planning) and lived space (the spatial ‘codes’ through which the built environment is navigated, negotiated, and recreated). Representational space is significant because, for Varga, it serves as the “location of possibility” for relative freedom of action; though conditioned by the ideology of conceived space and the quotidian nature of lived space, it ultimately resists both. What preserves this space of possibility within any dominant mode of production is quite simply history – the pre-existing conditions (including customs, languages and practices) in which all cultural production occurs. For Varga, however, these histories are not determinate but, rather, open up a realm of contingency and opportunity – a space in which there are no political guarantees, but through which new subjectivities are necessarily produced.

Central to Varga’s history are the ways in which Progressives constructed Hell’s Kitchen and its residents as objects of reform, and how these ideological constructions conditioned local practices, behaviors, and political subjectivities. Mobilizing statistics, documentary photography, and a purportedly scientific method for understanding the production of urban poverty and deviancy, Progressives trained their middle-class gaze onto Hell’s Kitchen with the aim of restructuring its space. The moral degradation and irrational behaviors of the “other half” were seen to have emerged from the dark and dingy recesses of street and tenement life. By restoring visibility (literally) to these spaces through practices of spatial restructuring – including the construction of model tenements, the provision of public baths, and the creation of open park

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space – Progressives hoped to produce the physical and social conditions for the emergence of a new, enlightened citizen-subject.

Indeed, the imagined community of new Americans that the Progressives hoped to bring forth rested upon a particular mental picture or “reformscape” – that of a rationally-organized city that promoted free movement and circulation (of people, objects, and the natural elements), harmonious economic development, and a sense of civic democracy among its inhabitants. The blockages, contradictions, and general messiness that was (and has always been) the real, living and breathing urban context in areas such as Hell’s Kitchen were simply dismissed as so many backwards features of the absence of rational planning; with proper reform and direct intervention in the urban environment, it was believed, such impediments to progress would steadily be removed. As Varga shows, however, the lived spaces of community in Hell’s Kitchen, far from being static, uniform and passive recipients of a top-down process of spatial restructuring, were in fact dynamic and heterogeneous socio-spatial formations that exhibited both “solidarity and fragmentation” in response to Progressive reform.

However well-intentioned, Progressive reform efforts were met with the everyday realities, practices, and desires of existing Hell’s Kitchen residents, complicating and often undermining these best-laid plans. Thus DeWitt Clinton Park, designed and built to great fanfare in the first decade of the twentieth century, was largely under-utilized by local residents, who found both the design and intended usage of the park uninspiring. Even more problematic were model tenement reforms targeting residents’ behavior and living practices. While many working class residents rejected outright the forms of authoritarian paternalism imposed on their daily lives – including invasions of privacy, required standards of cleanliness, and prohibitions on usage – others, particularly women, created their own spaces of sociality that did not conform to the visions of reformers.

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Parks and tenement buildings were not the only spaces in and over which class struggles were waged in Progressive-era Hell's Kitchen; equally important in the restructuring of urban space were local streets and places of work. Thus the creation of what Varga calls "frozen zones" – areas where police acted with impunity to either criminalize public behavior or engage in criminality themselves – were fully implicated in the production of spatial difference in Hell's Kitchen. Press reports at the time further seared the image of chaos, danger, and lawlessness into the public's mind. Demonstrations of arbitrary power not only created a pervasive sense of insecurity among residents, but also generated internal shifts and re-alignments within the area's ethnic, racial, religious, and working class communities. Their status as rights-bearing citizens constantly being called into question, many residents resorted to solidarities based on ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender, or territory.

Meanwhile, local industries' constant drive for profit maximization produced a perpetually unstable economic landscape that undermined any sense of economic security among working class residents, forcing them to engage in a wide range of survival strategies, including domestic piecework and supplemental jobs outside the home. Much of this work was oppressive, grueling, and dangerous; still, men and women alike managed to carve out for themselves spaces of relative autonomy and freedom. Indeed, Varga's descriptions of the spaces and rhythms of both work and leisure among the men and women of Hell's Kitchen make for some of his most vivid writing. What emerges is a portrait of working class life characterized by a combination of monotony, danger, raucous behavior, and colorful displays of masculinity – all underpinned by a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity.

Finally, Varga explores the "wants and desires" of Hell's Kitchen's residents. Though fundamentally no different from those of other classes and areas of the city – they, too, demanded certain 'rights' to the city that were irreducible to a single, common identity – these

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particular wants and desires were formed in specific urban conditions not of the residents' own choosing. And if the working class residents of Hell's Kitchen did not quite become a self-conscious community 'for itself' (to paraphrase Marx), within the crucible of Progressive-era spatial restructuring residents did begin to realize their position as objects of reform, and from this realization gain a desire to restructure urban space according to their own needs and wants. Varga describes in some detail three specific local campaigns, which met with varying degrees of success: [i] the campaign to remove freight tracks from Eleventh Avenue, where numerous residents had been maimed or killed; [ii] the struggle to build and maintain a city-financed amusement pier on 51st Street; and [iii] the effort to reopen a Settlement House servicing the needs of local residents. These struggles, Varga writes, "produced not a unified class-consciousness, nor an entrenchment of particularized spatial defense, but rather the various coalescent sites of spatial production that shifted and altered the very language used to evaluate its use" (p.227). This Lefebvrian interpretation understands the relationship between space and society as recursive and co-constitutive, with urban space as both product (of situated practices) and producer (of meanings and epistemologies).

If there is a weakness in Varga's book, however, it is perhaps his tendency to insufficiently flesh out some of the many theoretical approaches he adopts throughout the narrative. While much of his engagement with theory is genuinely insightful – his usage of Lefebvre, for example, offers deep insights into the ideas of this often-perplexing thinker – there are times when he introduces theory almost in passing, offering intriguing reflections that remain tantalizingly undeveloped. His reference to Latour and actor-network theory, for example, appears near the very end of the book, almost as a footnote. Other theories, such as Foucault's notion of heterotopia, are raised only briefly.

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These are but minor quibbles. Where Varga succeeds convincingly is in providing a radical geographical history of urban space in the Progressive era without succumbing to the economic determinism of much writing on uneven geographical development. Instead, he emphasizes the Lefebvrian notion of space as simultaneously lived, conceived, and representational. This is an incisive approach to understanding the historical-geographical production of Hell's Kitchen – its social, economic, and political geographies; the practices of accommodation, adaptation, and resistance among its residents; and the associated meanings, desires, and citizenship claims that both emerged from and reproduced these spatial conditions. From this perspective, the closed, system-like nature of capitalist urbanization begins to break down and open up onto vistas of alternative futures. Like all compelling histories, Varga's is a vision of the past that enables us to productively rethink not just the limitations, but also the possibilities inherent within the present conjuncture.

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