Book Review/ Compte rendu

Varga, Joseph J., *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, 269 pp., $18.95 Paperback (978-1-5836-7348-5).

At the beginning of the twentieth century Progressive reformers in the United States were attempting to introduce a raft of changes throughout cities. Linking people's physical environments with their personal character, reducing urban poverty and improving living conditions came to be seen as key to shaping a new, moral citizenry. As Joseph Varga details throughout *Hell's Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space,* these attempts were not always welcomed by the people they aimed to change, nor aided by the urban landscape itself. Concentrating upon the area of Hell's Kitchen, New York, from the period of 1894 - 1914, Varga turns a spatial lens upon the ways in which reform was contested, doomed to failure, or re-appropriated by a host of different actors. Varga shows the influence of spatial factors upon processes of democratic inclusion, politics and the boundaries of citizenship. In doing so, he argues for the importance of considering space as a vital factor of urban historical and social research, and aims to "encourage other researchers to utilize the production of space as a category for understanding and analysing other complex processes" (17).

Articulating his study as an analysis of the struggle to determine the use and future of the urban landscape, Varga outlines how the space of our cities is both a product and producer of social change. Beginning with a brief history of the Middle West Side, Varga begins to sketch his theoretical outlines of space as an active agent across areas of citizenship, work, and the production of history (Chapter 1). To do so, Varga draws primarily on David Harvey's work on uneven geographic development and Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. Subsequent chapters develop this theoretical grounding, beginning with a discussion of the central position that space plays in understanding Progressive reform, and linking the local setting of Hell's Kitchen to larger, global social changes (Chapter 2). This leads into analysis of the spatial production of difference and how this influenced the physical and cognitive construction of the district (Chapter 3), creating a relationship be-

tween concepts of citizenship and space, particularly the ways in which social reform was articulated as a restructuring of the physical environment (Chapter 4). Varga then describes how the economic life of Hell's Kitchen residents was intricately bound up within spatial frameworks (Chapter 5), and finally how political agency and space were also connected (Chapter 6). Throughout, Varga utilizes historical source material — such as personal testimonies, newspaper articles and governmental documents — in tandem with what he refers to as a "spatial archive" (50). This spatial archive consists of the photographs, charts, architectural plans and reports of reformers, and is effectively used for leverage on the Progressives' "epistemology of moral environmentalism and near obsession with spatiality" (50).

The key to understanding Varga's work is through the theoretical background outlined in the preliminary sections, and developed in subsequent chapters. Borrowing heavily from Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space,* Varga theorizes the production of urban space as a "triadic spatial interplay" (34) understood on three interwoven levels; space as lived, space as conceived, and space as representational. This formulation guides his thethe interpretation of source material, and places emphasis upon the competing understandings of space held by various parties. For example, the visions of a reformed city held by Progressives — "reformscapes" (128) — often jar against lived space, the daily environment and habits of residents. The intertwining of reality and imagination produces representational space; where "the world as perceived can be encountered through the filter of accumulated practices (lived and conceived)...to produce narratives of understanding" (p.34). Although a somewhat diffuse concept, this representational space is effectively the ways in which space is understood, and allows multiple interpretations which can overlap or resist one another. Produced due to the inability of any party to fully homogenise and control how urban space develops, it is the incoherent and unpredictable result of social relationships. This reformulates Lefebvre's original "passively experienced" (34) area as the primary location for the active production of space. Representational space becomes something "that can be informed, but never captured, by ideology" (34). Varga argues that this can best be seen through the existence of "liminal spaces" (43), which resist dominant narratives of reformers or spatial planners and are the sites where "new and different understandings of categories such as citizenship emerge" (43). These liminal spaces constitute the majority of locations explored in Varga's examples, ranging across rooftops, public gardens, piers, and tenement houses.

A strength of the book is its articulation of these spaces from multiple perspectives, with substantial room devoted to discussing gender, age, ethnicity, and occupation. Particularly interesting is the outlining of spatial economies, detailing how space affected the working routines and lives of dock and laundry workers, together with insights into how women navigated Hell's Kitchen against stigma and marginalization. Varga's detailed source material brings the space of residents' lives to the foreground, demonstrating how it offered opportunities as well as hindrances. His accounts of residents' resistance to the authorities, or their subversion of reformers' plans, succeed in giving social texture to the lives of inhabitants as humans, not simply objects of study. If there is a point of weakness within *Hell's Kitchen*, however, it is the complex theoretical support used to justify Varga's argument. A multitude of theories are introduced, and occasionally these needed to be explored in more depth. Particularly, Foucault's "heterotopias" and Appadurai's "scapes" remain largely terminology, with no meaningful engagement toward the substance of their theory. Familiarity with the works used would be an advantage and as such, this book may be more suitable for an advanced level of study and those who already have a wide knowledge of spatial theory and urban sociology.

Despite these reservations, Hell's Kitchen remains an insightful expansion on the importance of space for sociological investigation. Varga effectively demonstrates the relevance of space for considering questions of social justice, through the key role that urban space plays in the ability of residents to circumvent or resist attempts at control. Varga's argument places space at the critical juncture of allowing people the opportunity to contest narratives imposed by the authorities, media or reformers, and push for their right as citizens to "have demands taken seriously" (232). For his particular case study, this provides leverage on understanding the development of Hell's Kitchen through the links space had with politics, reform, migration, and class divides. In doing so, Varga shows that space is integral to any study of social phenomena occurring within an urban environment - whether historical or contemporary - and deserves a more central position within social research today.

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References

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

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