

Reviews

social relations.

Gill's reading of the predicaments facing former miners – once members of a highly militant union movement and now casualties of privatization – is also telling. She emphasizes the established history of “worker solidarity” (p. 80) and mobilization against state-sponsored injustices, and contrasts this to the present decline of the Fordist system of labor regulation, which has created the miners' unemployment and undermined their heroic basis for struggle. Gill makes the good point that lessons of the past are not always applicable to the present. She explains how ex-miners, now primarily tenuously surviving in the informal economy, have had to distance themselves from the struggle of collective mining unionism, something she laments.

In a funny sort of sleight of hand, “collective” resistance in the mines is aligned with the “community” currently being dismantled by neoliberal reform. And yet, the state-sponsored miner's life of past decades was clearly not an enviable one, but instead characterized by the extremes of family hardship, isolation, and vulnerability to not infrequent government oppression. Collective action amid misery and fractured communities are both bleak choices, but Gill's framing of the history of miner activism serves as heroic past counterpoint to grim current reality, where collective mobilization against unjust capitalist practices seems, in her words, “extremely difficult” (p. 183).

And yet just this has happened in Bolivia, in spectacular fashion, and with an unexpectedly successful outcome. In a series of confrontations between an inter-class and inter-ethnic coalition movement and the Bolivian government between April of last year and April of this year, “ordinary Bolivians” won a major victory over global capitalism, forcing the Bolivian government to renege on a deal it made with the Bechtel corporation to privatize the water system of the department of Cochabamba. Since called the “Bolivian Water War,” in effect participants were able to give the boot to a multinational corporation, Bechtel, while reasserting their local autonomy, and inalienable right to the precious resource, water. Not surprisingly, perhaps the key figure unifying and mobilizing the movement, Oscar Olivera, cut his teeth on the same style of “radical” worker union politics as the militant mining unions. It seems the outcome for a post-neoliberal Bolivian is not a totally grim and foregone conclusion, and nor is the story yet written.

In El Alto, the City of the Future, whatever might once have been “community” (and this includes the community of erstwhile “community studies) has become a “sick joke” (p. 27), an “extremely unstable amalgam of social relationships relative to the conflicts and contradictions that generate, sustain, and often dissolve it” (p. 35). Evoking and interrogating this unstable amalgam amidst neoliberal reform is no easy task, given the difficulties of tracing out its manifold and often alarming effects. We should thank Lesley Gill for taking it up.

Global Multiculturalism: Comparative Perspectives on Ethnicity, Race, and Nation, edited by Grant H. Cornwell and Eve Walsh Stoddard, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (2000), 368 pp..

Reviewed by Frank J. Lechner, Department of Sociology, Emory University.

For all the faddish talk of “multiculturalism” in the 1990s, there are few serious academic studies of the subject. Yet it offers scholars a great opportunity: here is an idea that spread across the globe and changed, at least among many elites, common ways of thinking about the diversity of nation-states. It would go too far to echo the title of one American essay on the subject by saying that “we” are all multiculturalists now, for “we” are not. But more and more of “us” are, and even those who aren't must now contend with a new global discourse. How, and to what extent, did multiculturalism become a global model for dealing with internal divisions? How did integration-via-assimilation lose its luster? What does multiculturalism mean for different groups? How did it play out in particular contexts?

Reporting the results of an eight-year project on “Cultural Encounters” at St. Lawrence University, Cornwell and Stoddard shed some light on such questions. They initially equate multiculturalism with the mere fact of diversity in states made up of more than one culture or ethnic group. From this diversity stem certain tensions, notably between “cementing a national identity” and “recognizing . . . identities that can cross national boundaries”

Reviews

(pp. 14-5). This multiculturalism, which I would call descriptive, provides the theme for most of the case studies that make up this volume. But multiculturalism is now more than just a descriptive category. As the “glue binding the major Western nation-states is weakening” (p. 6), divisions are now to be negotiated, differences to be dealt with as such. Multiculturalism becomes a deliberate approach to diversity, a type of normative discourse. In some countries, it has been adopted as official policy. This multiculturalism, which I would call reflexive, more closely relates to the global questions posed above. At least some of the essays in this book go beyond description of diversity to address this deeper dimension of the subject.

Organized into three parts, the volume examines diverse approaches to diversity as nation-states wrestle with the unsettling impact of three potential fault lines: ethnicity, race, and inequality. All the essays are informative to some degree, but they vary in the extent to which they address the problem of multiculturalism. Some, such as essays on the Chinese in Thailand or on postcolonial Kenya, mostly shed light on the form of diversity in those countries. A chapter on race and land reform in Zimbabwe efficiently reviews the history of struggle over land ownership in that country, but does not systematically pursue its consequences for Zimbabwe’s current version of national identity—difficult to define though it may be. Other contributors, for example in chapters on France and Brazil, probe more deeply into the implications of the presence of “others” for previously universalistic notions of national identity. An essay on the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas shows, in useful historical detail, how the struggle between indigenous groups and the state has helped to open up the Mexican political system, but does not pursue the consequences of assertive “indigenismo” for the redefinition of Mexican national identity. From my point of view, the most successful chapters are those that address the multicultural theme head on, because they deal with cases in which multiculturalism has become a fairly explicit part of official discourse and policy. For example, Stoddard and Cornwell contribute a chapter on Trinidad and Tobago, under the telling title “Miscegenation as a Metaphor for Nation-Building,” and Dupont and Lemarchand analyze Canada’s official multiculturalism, showing how its virtuous rhetoric has provoked various critical political responses.

Partly because the book offers few explicit comparisons, it is difficult to draw general lessons from the long series of cases. The Canada chapter provides some: “the facticity of diversity does not induce, in itself, multiculturalism,” the authors argue; the latter is “a solution to specific problems” but also “a construction, and . . . debatable as such” (p. 311). Multiculturalism can come in different guises, they add: as diktat, as myth, or (ironically) as assimilation device. And even where it becomes state policy it may leave the structural organization of power unchanged (p. 329). Multiculturalism as a form of containing and celebrating difference may therefore fail—for example, because it can be used as a power tool, because it can degenerate into mere division for division’s sake, or because it can fail to make a dent in actual monocultural forms of domination.

As the editors recognize, “[t]he parceling of chapters and states into unitary containers masks transnational identities that spring from indigenous locations, diasporas, and globalization of the workforce” (p. 16). Some essays in the book do touch on such transnational links, but few analyze them thoroughly. For example, the Brazil chapter only tantalizingly mentions the role of international conventions and the international music industry in supporting a movement of racial solidarity. The Mexico chapter focuses on indigeneity as it plays out in that country, without situating the Zapatistas as part of a global movement. Apart from the editors, few contributors address an issue raised by the title of the book, namely how multiculturalism “went global.” To be sure, charting the flow of initially nebulous, sometimes esoteric ideas is hard. But with the historical evidence at its disposal, this group of scholars could have said more about that flow. Only occasionally do we get a glimpse of the globalization of multiculturalism as a model, for example when the chapter on Canada briefly shows how the meaning of multiculturalism there changed under the influence of a discourse flowing back from the United States. By examining multiculturalism primarily within the confines of particular nation-states, this book takes on a postmodern problem in surprisingly modernist fashion.

In its selection of evidence, the book does convey a postmodern sensibility. Some chapters, such as those on Zimbabwe and Bosnia, examine the “hard” realities of racial or ethnic politics; a chapter on China examines actual minority policy. But most contributions rely on interpretation of some symbolic display of identity—the controversy about racial mixing in Trinidad, representations of race in the Brazilian mass media, various cultural performances in Guatemala, arguments about what it means to be French articulated in hearings of a commission on nationality, artistic renderings of African-American double consciousness in the U.S., and so on. Of course, such analyses are indispensable in understanding the meaning of meanings. But in nation-states, identities crystallize in rules and relations, institutions and policies. Understanding multiculturalism in practice, therefore, requires more institutional analysis than this volume provides. For example, a reader of the French chapter would want to know how educational practices changed after the work nationality commission, taking into account the distinctive position of Muslim minorities, had made the traditional French understanding of integration more problematic. Similarly, closer analysis of the “structural organization of power” would have provided stronger empirical backing for the

Reviews

skepticism about the reality of multiculturalism that some chapters understandably express.

Linking the symbolic politics of identity to actual policy formation and power struggles, on a global scale no less, is a tall order. It is no fault of this book that it does not constitute an exemplar for how to carry out such multidimensional, distinctly global analysis. Had it been more successful in realizing its ambition, it might indeed have offered the “new paradigm for a critical and transdisciplinary approach to global studies” (p. ix) promised by the editors.

On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture. by Setha M. Low. Austin: University of Texas Press (2000), xv, 274 pp

Reviewed by James N. Green, Latin American History Department, California State University, Long Beach.

Foreign travelers meandering through small cities or towns in Latin America will inevitably find themselves at a main plaza. A belle époque fountain, an antique looking bandstand, or a monument to a national figure may dominate the center of the square. If one sits for a while on one of the benches strategically stationed around the plaza, one might soon be approached by vendors peddling wares created for an international tourist market, a shoe shine boy offering to spit polish one's Reeboks, or a homeless girl selling Chicklets or some cheap item for a nominal price. If a canopy of trees shades the plaza and the gardens are kept up, one might linger a while to observe the occupants of this space: clusters of old men chatting among themselves, a small boy begging his mother to purchase a bright balloon, bunches of uniformed school girls on route home for lunch, and a couple intimately sharing some secret. Setha M. Low has artfully captured this world of Latin American public sociability in her meticulous ethnographic and cultural study of the politics and the social production of public space as represented in two plaza in San José, Costa Rica. Relying on twenty-five years of fieldwork and research in this Central American nation, the author offers an excellent example of how a micro-study can inform on much broader trends in urban transformation and serve as a tool for theorizing the effects of United States-driven globalization, not only on Latin America, but also perhaps on many parts of Asia and Africa.

Low is interested in the contested meanings and uses of public space, especially as modernization, urban renewal, and international capital alter public areas of the city. Her ultimate argument is that these places are among the last forums for democratic and personal interactions in a civil society. She arrives at this perspective through a careful study of two different public spaces: the Parque Central that represents the legacy of the intimate social world of colonial San José and the Plaza de la Cultura that projects modernity and commercialism onto the capital's downtown area. The different uses of these plazas by the city's residents and the significantly different cultural meanings associated with the two areas symbolize the dramatic changes that are taking place in urban Latin America. In this work, the author points to considerable economic and political transformations in urban social ecology that transcend the example of Costa Rica. This study could have focused on a small town in the Brazilian Amazon, in the highlands of Bolivia or in rural Argentina. The forces at play are the same and the implications for urban sociability are similar. One of the many strengths of this book is the way in which Low's analysis about the changes taking place in San José can be applied to urban areas throughout Latin America.

The traditional grid pattern of the colonial Latin American city placed the main plaza at the center of the political, religious, and social life of its inhabitants. Low and others have argued that many times the Spaniards built new urban centers directly on top of the markets, temples, and public spaces of the sedentary indigenous populations that they conquered. Constructing churches, arcades with market stalls, and government buildings on the sites that already had dense cultural meaning created a new spatial hybridity. Whereas the Spanish colonial elite enjoyed the newly constructed plazas and gardens as spaces for socializing, gossiping, and ostentatiously demonstrating their wealth and power, African slaves, indigenous people, and the mestizo population crisscrossed and occupied these same areas. The social interactions that took place, whether among the high or the humble, became an integral element in the dailies lives of people who occupied a world where time was certainly much slower than it is today and face-to-face communication was an essential component of all kinds of interactions.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Latin America elites, enamored of Georges Eugène Haussmann's urban