

BOOK REVIEWS

William Sites, *Remaking New York: Primitive Globalization and the Politics of Urban Community* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 256 pp., \$19.95 (cloth).

“Primitive accumulation” is Marx’s description of the crude concentrating of wealth that takes place in capitalist economic development. The basis of the whole process, Marx explains, is the violent, coercive use of force by the state to displace the peasantry from lands where they have worked, followed by “bloody legislation” used to regulate the consequences of these jarring separations from traditional ways of life. Beggars, vagrants, and poor people generally endure the most immediate consequences (pp. 13-15).

Skipping ahead from feudalism to the present era’s cross-border economic integration, William Sites borrows from this idea to frame his theory of primitive globalization. For Sites, today’s mode of “primitive globalization” follows a similar pattern of reactive politics. In the contemporary United States, probusiness coalitions support policies that displace the urban poor as the state dismantles welfarist safeguards. Inequality increases, instability grows, and communities fragment.

Sites examines the transformation of New York City in the era of primitive globalization, concentrating on political action at the national, local, and neighborhood levels. For Sites, the story of late-twentieth-century New York and, in particular, the Lower East Side (LES) neighborhood is less a narrative of resurgence and revitalization than a story of community fragmentation within the city. The first three chapters of the volume develop and successfully support this thesis. Chapter 1 describes Sites’s concept of primitive globalization; chapter 2 describes the evolution of the city from a patchwork of neighborhoods into a neoliberal growth machine; and chapter 3 reworks material from Sites’s previous writing on the gentrification of the LES.

After chapter 4, the book’s utility diminishes as the author devotes an inordinate attention to the squatter movements in the neighborhood at the expense of other social movements in housing, labor, and health that helped many to successfully buck displacement. Sites’s work neglects many “best practices” in community organizing that can be found in the LES. Omission of the work of ACT UP, Housing Works, and the community garden advocacy groups, all of which significantly altered the landscape of urban activism throughout the years of Sites’s study, creates an uneven picture. Sites is not alone. Recent books by Janet Abu-Lughod (1994), Neil Smith (1996), and Christopher Mele (2000) treat the neighborhood as a model case of urban gentrification where community sovereignty is lost to global market forces. For the most part, these authors do not seriously consider how community-based movements

successfully brokered compromises that allowed them to survive and thrive despite immense pressure from corporate developers.

As Sites contends, countless parts of the city were transformed by real estate pressures. In many ways, the neighborhood's sense of difference and "otherness" was repackaged as a highly marketable and sanitized neighborhood, without many of its previous rough edges. Still, the East Village has thrived as a somewhat anachronistic, perhaps even utopian, experience in community building in the midst of hostile market forces. The neighborhood continues to produce social relations and representational spaces of opposition, despite gentrification, the increase of "hip" cultural capital, and official dismay. Such community politics occasionally thwart the politics of fear propelling the logic of the "Revanchist City." Chapters 2 and 3 of *Remaking New York* discuss these competing pressures.

Chapter 2 reviews the transformation of New York through three recent urban regimes—Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani—all fixated with urban growth. With his election as mayor in 1993, Giuliani initiated a series of efforts to enforce "quality of life" policies that facilitated middle-class renewal of low-income neighborhoods such as the LES. The mayor's efforts responded to the sense of fear about public space that had been constructed in the years before and just after New York's fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s. Within a context of rising unemployment, declining social supports, and the increasing presence of minority groups, a vicious counterreaction against immigrants, people on welfare, and other socially vulnerable groups unfolded (Smith 1996). Narratives of decline were easily manipulated into a politics of resentment toward those who utilized public assistance. Sites explains: "Blame tended to resurrect time-honored themes in U.S. politics? [what belongs in place of ? ?] the unworthy and dependent poor, the misguided generosity of social reformers, the unreasonable demands of racial minorities, the irresponsibility of free-spending politicians" (p. 39). Mayor Giuliani skillfully played on the politics of "revenge as an antidote to insecure identities" (Smith 1996, 211), and he rode this resentment of the homeless, those on public assistance, and social outsiders to victory. Over the next eight years, he stirred anxieties to justify shifting public resources away from services for the socially vulnerable and toward urban policing. These policies favored renewed social control of public spaces in an effort to generate support for their redevelopment.

Much of chapter 3 considers the story of those involved in the struggle over land use in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. Sites rightly notes that the underside of the "quality of life" campaign was increased police brutality, social control, and the "blandification" of urban space (p. 60). But there was opposition too. Sites describes how when Mayor Giuliani's draconian approach of "zero tolerance" policing resulted in 99 bullets in the body of unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo, the incident united much of New York in protest.

Chapter 4 of the book traces the struggles between squatters and the city, but Sites contends that activism in the LES ended after 1989. "The dramatic confrontations in

Tompkins Square Park also reemerge in a new light: no longer the culmination of a movement, they are symptoms of its endgame” (p. 104). Such comments are suspect. While the squatters postured during the late 1980s, few results materialized until they and their representatives actually cut a deal with the Bloomberg administration some 14 years later. Furthermore, he ignores the work of garden activists who built their own Central Park out of decaying city lots or the birth of Housing Works, a radical social service housing agency that used the tools of community economic development to increase the housing stock for low-income residents with HIV/AIDS. For many residents, the Giuliani years presented a compelling imperative to act.

Although it is certainly possible to suggest that gentrification robbed the LES of its character and all that was unique about the neighborhood is lost, it has also spawned a revitalized mode of activist engagement, which Sites either ignores or mischaracterizes. He ignores the queer activist presence in the LES, where members of ACT UP revitalized the scene starting in 1987 and generated policy victories in the neighborhood, state, and federal arena. Instead, Sites reports that “community mobilization in the LES represents an unsurprising failure” (p. 101). While Sites calls for local actors to look “beyond a neighborhood base” (p. 104), he fails to recognize the work of those activists who worked in the LES but took a citywide approach to fighting for more equitable social policies.

Sites’s work reflects a nostalgia for the “golden era” of activism of the 1930s and 1960s, after which, he implies, urban activism effectively ended. “Following the 1960s, when mobilizations in cities had successful impacts on social perception and public policy,” Sites explains, “urban-based activism seemed to become more attenuated and diffuse” (p. 105). Yet, accounts of the urban activism of the 1960s, in particular, federally-funded activism in the LES (Weissman, 1969), demonstrate that they represented anything but halcyon days. One could even argue that these activists’ use of federal funds to protest against their funders created a backlash that prevented future generations from enjoying federal support for community organizing. And despite facing a better-funded opposition and numerous setbacks, recent organizers have brokered deals and compromises that made the city more livable.

Despite its shortcomings, the central thesis of *Remaking New York* rings true: “Neoliberal policies, by actively disembedding social actors, undermine the capacity of social actors, undermine the capacity of society to engage responsibly with globalization and urban transformation? [symbol?] suggests that strengthening the ability of government to act productively and democratically in the public interest is an urgent task” (p. 149). Yet, government cannot be expected to act without the impetus of local citizens. It is up to local organizers to research, provide data, preach, scream, be creative, pressure targets, and use direct action to communicate this message to government officials to create the case for change. Without this community role, globalization’s influence on urban inequality will only become more pronounced.

REFERENCES

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