

BOOK REVIEWS

FROM THE GROUND UP: COMMUNITY GARDENS IN NEW YORK CITY AND THE POLITICS OF SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION, by Efrat Eizenberg, Ashgate: Farnham, Burlington, 2013.

From the Ground Up is a book about the urban residents, about the relationships between them and to their environment. Eizenberg opens her book pointing to Georg Simmel's depressing description of the urbanite as blasé and apathetic, over-taxed by his/her environment, reserved and indifferent towards others. About 200 pages later she concludes by sketching a quite different vision describing the so called "organic resident", an urban dweller who vividly interacts with the environment and by doing so actively participates in the process of its production. Eizenberg's study of New York City community gardens is led by the question of how urban residents participate in the production of meaningful, supportive space, and concurrently "constitute themselves as meaningful actors within the urban scene by organizing collectively and committing themselves to community gardening" (p. 2).

The production of space, in a Lefebvrian sense, and the politicization of urban residents, she argues, are dialectically interrelated processes that take place on three interrelated levels: the individual level, the collective level and what is referred to as the institutional level. Guided by the described analytical differentiation *From the Ground Up* is composed of three main parts: 'Cultivating a New Individual: Life, Needs, Desires'; 'The Spring of the Commons'; and 'Reaped Politicization'. Analogically to this triad, Eizenberg defines the three moments of resistance as conceptualized by Katz: resilience—reworking—resistance, whereby resistance implies the highest degree of political consciousness and the highest potential to impact on broader social issues. As a consequence the triad is also a continuum in the personal development of the urban residents towards "organic residents".

Eizenberg poses her study in the context of the current hegemony of neoliberal productions of urban space, producing abstract, commodified space, a process of production from which its users are excluded; space which serves first and foremost the ultimate objective of capital accumulation, and which promotes exchange-value not use-value. At the same time, within this conjuncture there are spaces neglected by capitalist development, yielding potential for the creation of other, counter-hegemonic, differential spaces. It is in this sense that Eizenberg "examines community gardens in New York City as a counter-force within the urban environment which strives to resist and transform the prevailing social and spatial environment." (p. 12).

A chapter preceding the three main parts introduces the reader to the history of community gardens in the United States and especially to their development in the context of New York City in the last four decades. Here, Eizenberg argues, on the backdrop of neoliberal restructuring and uneven urban development, community gardens can be described by specific characteristics such as bottom-up organisation and the continuous struggle against politics threatening their very existence. Beyond that the chapter offers a brief quantitative description of the approximately 650 community gardens in New York, pointing to the fact that gardens are located mostly in generally marginalized, underprivileged areas.

In the first of the main parts 'Cultivating a New Individual: Life, Needs, Desires' Eizenberg's background as an environmental psychologist comes into play. This part focuses on the individual aspects of place-making as connected to community gardening. As differential spaces gardens offer the potential for different kinds of relationships and spatial practices, thus altering the everyday life of marginalized urban residents. Eizenberg shows how residents, through gardening, reconstruct their environment according to their own personal history and corresponding to their identity. Furthermore, they reinforce their relationship towards the environment by developing a sense of ownership and control over it. These practices of resilience, Eizenberg argues, on an individual scale contain the budding politicization of urban residents.

Part II: 'The Spring of the Commons' focuses on collective experience related to gardening, the formation of a gardeners collective and the collective production of space. The collective might on the one hand include the most different elements entailing lots of internal challenges, on the other hand it is tied together by the shared narratives, the similar position that participants assume within the broader urban society and most importantly by collective action and production of space. Once functioning as open spaces produced by a collective of residents and serving the needs and desires of the community, the gardens might be regarded as "actually existing commons". As such, Eizenberg argues, the socially produced spaces can offer an alternative resource and experience to urban resident (p. 103), one that is not oriented to the generation of profit and one which does not exclude residents from the process of its production. Eizenberg interprets the collective stage of engagement in community gardens not only as a reactive survival strategy, but as a collective intervention, entailing politically conscious subjects – as reworking, to put it in Katz's terms.

In Part III: 'Reaped Politicization' the author examines how through further institutionalization the garden collectives achieve a more powerful position within the city's political framework. The institution of community gardens is an assemblage of heterogeneous organizations which struggles successfully for the interests of gardens on a citywide scale. On the other hand it has to deal with internal tensions evolving from contradictions between the original grassroots character of community gardens and their ongoing institutionalization. Still Eizenberg suggests that the in-

stitutionalization of gardens bears the potential for gardeners to reach the highest stage of politicization, making them politically conscious “organic residents”, vividly interacting with their environment. This is where Eizenberg’s argues we should speak of what Katz defines as resistance, interpreting the institution of community gardens as a social movement fighting for nothing less than the right to the city.

From the Ground Up is a rich book full of illustrative insights into the world of community gardening in New York City. Eizenberg lets the reader slip into this world by letting the gardeners speak – segments of interviews are spread over the whole book’ although, unfortunately she misses a description of her methodology in detail. Conducting a multilevel analysis Eizenberg captures a wide range of aspects, this however leads her to give up some of the analytical astuteness which a more focused approach could have entailed. Furthermore, it seems that the author did not take the time to deepen the theoretical discussions related to all of the diverse issues addressed over the course of the book. Notions such as that of community gardens as “actually existing commons” within “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), or Eizenberg’s conceptualization of garden-activists as “organic residents” “are extremely interesting suggestions that could have been elaborated on more comprehensively. Especially the latter suffers from a lack of theoretical derivation. Eizenberg follows Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals”, although without elaborating on Gramsci’s vision of “organic intellectuals” directive function within their social group and implications for the transformation of society (Gramsci, 1999).

Another subject which could have gained from further elaboration is the discussion of the conflict (inherent to many social movements) between grassroots-independent and low hierarchy-character on the one hand and the institutionalization of the gardens on the other hand. While the author understands institutionalization as “the struggle of the gardens to obtain more power and influence in the city’s affairs and to extend their impact on spatial and social issues beyond the premises of the garden” (p. 143), quite the opposite might be the case: the increasingly institutionalized coalition of gardens can be used by city authorities to gain influence on the formerly autonomous collectives, to gain control over an differential space and to bring it in line with the hegemonic conception of space (p. 174). Since the empirical case does not seem to provide the means to solve the dilemma, I suggest that further reference to theoretical discussions on this issue could have brought some useful impetus here.

Although fully conscious of the unsolved issue the structural design of Eizenberg’s analysis implicitly contains a preference for an institutionalized version of the community gardens over a grassroots approach. The latter is assumed to be less politically conscious and therefore less capable to deal with the broader underlying inequalities of society. This is the great disadvantage of the analytical analogy between the individual–collective–institutional triad and Katz’s three R’s of Resistance (Katz, 2004). Surely it does not make sense for emancipatory movements to try

and close themselves into some kind of local autonomy. Rather, they should engage in an “on-going struggle with state and capitalist actors”, as Cumbers (2012, 137) recently suggested. Nevertheless, as Eizenberg admits, there are good reasons for the conviction that capitalism is best fought from its margins (p. 170). Therefore to link politically conscious practices— this is to say resistance – to the process of institutionalization might be an unnecessary restriction. The independent character of urban social movements appears even more precious if one considers Lefebvre’s vision, according to which our most important political task is to imagine “a totally different kind of city” (Harvey, 2012, xvi).

References

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BEDOUIIN OF MOUNT SINAI: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THEIR POLITICAL ECONOMY, by Emanuel Marx, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.

This unique book of Marx is based on a long period of in-depth ethnographic research conducted among the Bedouin of Mount Sinai (between 1972-1982 the author spent 12 months in field research). The book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion, references and index.

Marx indicates that this study is dominated by one central theme: the reflection of global and regional politics and economics on the social forms and behaviors of the Bedouin. Alongside, Marx stresses that this study examines economic and political issues from an anthropological viewpoint.

The Introduction explains how Marx came to work with the Bedouin tribes of Mount Sinai, and how the book gradually took its shape. Following this, Chapter