

evolution of the company town from one of complete paternalistic control to one where the agency of homeownership brought the housing of the industrial worker into the mainstream of American domesticity.

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Specular city: transforming culture, consumption, and space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973 by Laura Podalsky, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, USA, 2004, 288 pp. ISBN 1-56639-947-5.

Laura Podalsky offers in this book an analysis of the physical and discursive transformations that took place in Buenos Aires between 1955 and 1973, a period marked by the fall and return of Perón. Following in the footsteps of David Harvey, Edward Soja and Frederic Jameson – as the author informs us in the introduction – *Specular city* is a cultural urban study that combines a revision of new architectural typologies and urban practices with contemporary literature, painting and film analyses.

The book is broken down into four main chapters that deal with large cultural and spatial phenomena, as well as five intervals, entitled *interruption*, *interstices*, *interlude*, *interspersion* and *intervention*, which focus on more discrete questions. Throughout these four ‘cityscapes’ and five ‘snapshots’ (as Podalsky introduces them) the book builds its main argument, which is that after the fall of Perón the middle-class sectors of Buenos Aires renegotiated their position in society. According to the author, after a decade in which the working-class sectors were the main protagonists of the public space, the 1960s were characterized by the predominance of an urban-consumer discourse addressed to the privileged middle classes, which thus became the protagonists and main users of the new public spaces in Buenos Aires. This new hegemony, according to Podalsky, opened the field for the subsequent implementation of the neo-liberal project in Argentina in the mid-1970s.

Interruption (pp. 28-47) sets the tone of the main argument as it reviews the urban events that took place in 1955, during and immediately after the fall of Perón. Its purpose is to stress the political significance of the use of public space – in

particular the use of the urban spectacle – and to interpret the clash between Peronists and anti-Peronists as – among other conflicts – a struggle for the material city.

The first chapter (pp. 48-99) discusses the controversial Peronist legacy in Buenos Aires through the lens of literary works and films, as well as concrete government measures. It also describes how cultural changes during this period tended to foster a trend towards consumerism and a new kind of domesticity away from the previous traditional public spaces.

Interstices (pp. 100-17) introduces the issue of the living conditions of the new urban poor. Through an analysis of the work of the visual artist Antonio Berni, Podalsky explores the proliferation of shanty towns and downgraded hotels that became the home of the new inhabitants – mostly provincial immigrants – and the conflicts that emerged there.

The second chapter (pp. 118-37) outlines the appearance of new architectural typologies and reports a significant increase in the use of private cars. These changes are discussed in light of new patterns in the use of space, and in particular the changes in the division between public and private space recorded not only in social-science literature but also present in various films and literature works. According to the author, this preoccupation – in both material and discursive dimensions – expresses the anxieties of the middle class about their place in a post-Peronist social order.

Interlude (pp. 138-47) is the ‘snapshot’ that suits Podalsky’s definition of snapshot best. This short section looks at an emblematic cultural centre in Buenos Aires in the 1960s, *The Di Tella*, and its effect on society. While analysing contemporary artistic trends and the increasing connection between the worlds of culture and business, these pages manage to exude the excitement and novelty of the art scene in Buenos Aires during this decade. The chapter also underscores one of the book’s beliefs, which is that this period was marked by the progressive advance of a commercial rationale invading all social and cultural spheres.

In the third chapter (pp. 148-75) Podalsky continues to develop her case by using as evidence the emergence of new cultural industries, in particular the weekly magazine *Primera Plana* and the publishing house EUDEBA (Buenos Aires University Press), in the context of a general publishing boom that witnessed the multiplication of new publishing houses and readers in only a few years. Her point here is that in spite of their democratizing rhetoric, these new cultural

industries were intended chiefly for the privileged middle classes with a discourse that only represented their own needs and desires. Podalsky questions the efficacy of their democratizing project and argues that, on the contrary, these institutions were quite effective in crafting the new hegemonic project. This is perhaps the least persuasive argument in the book, as it seems somehow problematic to combine *Primera Plana* with EUDEBA in order to sustain this hypothesis. In the case of the former, it is clear by the evidence provided that the magazine was not engaged in a democratizing project, but in the case of the latter, it is difficult to arrive at the same conclusion, at least based on the information provided here.

Interspersion (pp. 176-83) brings back the discussion to the physical dimension by describing the appearance of other new typologies in Buenos Aires: commercial skyscrapers and multi-family dwelling units for social housing at an unprecedented scale.

The fourth chapter (pp. 184-207) begins by illuminating one of the book's key conceptual components: its understanding of cultural hegemony. Building on the book's introduction, Podalsky explains that her usage of the concept of hegemony differs from the classic Gramscian theory and instead is aligned with that of Laclau and Mouffe. In Gramscian terms all political indicators in Argentina from 1955 to 1973 (for example, constant oscillations between military and democratically elected administrations) would suggest that a new hegemony was never consolidated after the fall of Perón. But, as shown in the previous chapters, other signs are taken into consideration here to present the case of a different type of hegemonic project expressed in a set of discourses that articulate the needs and desires of a particular social group. Following the same line of argument developed formerly, this hegemonic

project is mostly articulated by a new consuming and mercantilist culture. In this chapter the pieces of evidence discussed are the new attitudes towards sexual behaviour and the increasing commercialization of sex through the culture industries.

Intervention (pp. 208-27) analyses an emblematic political film in the same light – *La hora de los hornos* – and another booming business – the advertising industry. Podalsky's analysis of *La hora* is impeccable as are all her film accounts in general: this is a terrain in which she shows great erudition and where the book reaches its sharpest and deepest analyses.

The epilogue (pp. 228-38) lastly closes the loop by arguing that the 1960s served as an incubator of the urban-consumer culture of the 1990s, the quintessential Argentine neo-liberal decade.

From the enunciation of her first hypothesis, Podalsky is careful not to fall into cultural-deterministic positions. She argues that the hegemonic project exposed throughout these pages 'helped' to constitute or has 'laid the groundwork' for the neo-liberal projects that would begin to flourish in the late 1970s. She also warns that the concept of a 'middle-class hegemony is problematic' as it may suggest a sort of 'homogeneity and coherent social agency' that she – along with Laclau and Mouffe – rejects. There are no simple conclusions about cause and effect. It remains open to what extent the role of the Buenos Aires middle classes – in their particular contexts – did help to develop a neo-liberal project similar to many of those implemented worldwide in different cultural contexts.

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