

## 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 Reebocks, 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 plazas 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 daily 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

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reforms of Paris in the late-nineteenth century, remodeled some of the central areas of their nations' capitals. San José's Plaza Central was given a facelift, and a new Victorian kiosk crowned the space. Military bands offered concerts of classical and popular music for the public, and young couples used the park as a site for courting. In the post-World War II era upper class families moved away from the city's center, and the elegant polish to the park faded. Yet the rhythms of everyday life continued to pulsate through the plaza as friends met there to socialize in the midst of growing urban decay. San José's Plaza de la Cultura, on the other hand, is a recent invention, a modernist construction of stark concrete with little vegetation that has become the province of teenagers, tourists, sexual cruising and solicitation. In contrast to the intimate familiarity that characterized the Parque Central, the Plaza de la Cultura proclaims itself as an open forum for less personal and more temporal social and commercial interactions.

Municipal governments have remodeled and rebuilt these sites in recent years as a part of urban renewal. Users of these spaces have responded in various ways. The author documents some of the public debates and controversies regarding alternative plans for park renovations to reveal how important these places remain for urban residents, arguing that "public spaces, such as the Costa Rican plaza, are one of the last democratic forums for public dissent in a civil society (p. 240)." This is certainly true, as social movements in Latin America continue to occupy central plazas for protest demonstrations and public parks still offer an open forum for political debate. Yet, as Low points out, the massive influx of foreign capital and consumerism have restructured urban life. MacDonald's fast food restaurants have begun to replace traditional leisurely lunchtime eating establishments, and new pedestrian shopping promenades channel thousands of consumers along narrow paved-over streets overflowing with commercial establishments. Urban planning and spatial renovations can also erase sites of social contestation. One dramatic example is the Praça da Se in central São Paulo, Brazil. When architects designed the new Metro station during the military regime, they created a renovated multi-layered plaza in front of the cathedral that diminished the possibilities for holding traditional mass rallies at that location. As politicians and bureaucrats manipulate public spaces for an array of purposes, the democratic power of these open expanses can dissipate. Ultimately, *One the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* is an appeal to save those public parks and plazas that have historically facilitated social interactions and political engagement, not only in Latin America, but in other parts of the world as well.

**Hardest Times: The Trauma of Long Term Unemployment.** by Thomas J. Cottle. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers (2001), 311 pp.

**Reviewed by Paul Durrenberger, Department of Anthropology, Pennsylvania State University.**

Hardest Times reports conversations with 13 unemployed men. It also provides chapters on shame and trauma and discussion of the psychology of male identity to connect the narratives to the theoretical literature in psychology. Cottle's focus is on personal portraits of individual men in their own words, rather than illustrating particular attitudes or opinions (p. 6). Early in the book (p. 8) he acknowledges that the stories may cause discomfort to some readers because "we too dread the possibility of unemployment . . ." In the epilogue he suggests that unemployment is a consequence of a public policy that requires a portion of Americans to be kept unemployed and in poverty (pp. 283-284). One of his informants says, "The government bails the S and L boys out of trouble with our money, but don't bail us out when we didn't break a single law, how do you explain that one?" (p. 228). That's the question I'm left with. My problem with this book is that nowhere does Cottle connect these three points.

Some of the problems with the book are technical, and the lack of thorough copyediting suggests that the book was rushed into production. Some might wonder how and why Cottle put together these stories of an unemployed white construction worker, white engineer, immigrant Jewish Hungarian and an American Jew, two black manual laborers, white insurance salesman, two black teenagers, a housing project dweller in his sixties who prepares to die when his wife dies as he watches without the choices resources or insurance would allow, a West Indian immigrant in London, and a suburban-dwelling unemployed corporate computer guy who finally found some work. The one thing they have in common is long periods of unemployment. That is the topic of the book, but there is some reason to think that responses to unemployment differ by class, nationality, and ethnicity. The pattern that