

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Andrew Newman, *Landscape of Discontent: Urban Sustainability in Immigrant Paris*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780816689620 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816689637 (paper)

“My goal as an ethnographer”, writes Andrew Newman, “is to illustrate how people *inhabit* and negotiate contradictory political positions, rather than smooth them out of the narrative or conceal them altogether” (p. xxxviii, emphasis added). *Landscape of Discontent* is an ethnography of various actors—from undocumented immigrants, French activists, and city planners and politicians—and their politics of “to inhabit” in the global city of Paris. Newman documents struggles to turn a brownfield in the northeast of the city into a postindustrial site now known as the *Jardins d’Éole*, an experiment in sustainable urban development that opened in 2007. By narrowing down his ethnographic fieldwork to this particular “urban commons”, Newman is “able to show a diverse set of ways in which people ‘landscape’ their political discontents and dreams” (p.xli). As a result, *Landscape of Discontent* is a narrative on the “messiness” of urban life and how the politics that emerge around that messiness shape the urban landscape. This is a fantastic book that should be a required reading for anyone invested in debates on the right to the city, urban political ecology, and the cultural politics of belonging in contemporary France.

Landscape of Discontent is an “anthropology of the city” which “combines an ethnographic focus on the material infrastructure of the city, with an emphasis on how such assemblages are integrated into the production of space under global capitalism”(p.xviii). The book is yet another reminder to critical geographers why ethnography matters (see Herbert 2000). Drawing on the rich radical and critical urban studies tradition in geography and anthropology, the book brilliantly brings to life the tension Henri Lefebvre (1991: 39) noted

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between *representations of space* (how planners and bureaucrats conceive space) and *representational spaces* (“space as directly lived” by inhabitants). As Newman puts it, “this ethnography privileges the everyday practices, lives, and stories of people who with their own *creative agency* rarely follow the logic of the designs accorded to them by architects, planners, or, for that matter, social theorists” (p.xviii; emphasis added).

The *Jardins d'Éole* is located in the 19th arrondissement of Paris along the rail tracks of the *Gare de l'Est*—a busy train terminal that connects France to Eastern Europe. Northeast Paris has been hidden “behind the grand façade of the train terminal” and has historically served as a “‘backstage’ hinterland to the spectacle of modernity that was Haussmann’s Paris” (p.14). Slaughterhouses, warehouses, funeral homes, and dumping grounds have dominated the functions carried out in this “liminal space” which “was neither working-class *banlieue* nor bourgeois City of Light” (p.15). Over the course of the 20th century the area began to be populated by large numbers of North Africans and Sub-Saharan Africans, making it one of the last bastions of residence for immigrant and working-class families within the administrative boundaries of the city. The social and geographical context of the story matters because it allows Newman to provide “a window into the way that diversity is not only lived in contemporary France but made politically meaningful (and productive) through politics that constructs the nation at the scale of the neighborhood” (p.xxxi). The ecological struggles that ensued in the 1990s and 2000s to turn the *Cour du Maroc*—the polluted dumping site that preceded the *Jardins d'Éole*—into a model of sustainable urban development are a microcosm of the discontents, tensions, and imaginations that inform the contradictory politics of cultural belonging in contemporary France.

The book is divided into six substantive chapters, each detailing distinct, yet interconnected, struggles over the park and the city. Moreover, the chapters shift scales in order

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to account for the various local, regional, national, and global actors and institutions that over time have attempted to “landscape” their desires and political economic motivations in the *Jardins d'Éole*. Thus, Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the city and neighborhood scales in order to document the contested past of northeast Paris and contemporary ecological struggles over the proper use of brownfield and polluted sites in the area. Chapter 3 looks at the park itself to document the cultural politics of belonging and the different versions of republicanism that are spatialized therein. The DEVE (*Direction des Espaces Verts et de l'Environnement* / ‘City of Paris Parks and Environment Department’), neighborhood activists, and youths from immigrant origins are the main characters in this chapter, which highlights the contested nature of “actually existing republicanism” (p.67). Chapter 4 shifts scales and engages with the global cities literature. In particular, Newman makes a strong case against the green turn in urban planning and design. The discursive construction of Paris as an “ecocity” has enabled policy makers to push for urban projects designed to facilitate the gentrification of Paris and make it a model of urban sustainability at the global scale. This, Newman convincingly argues, can have devastating effects on the “right to the city” of poorer residents; as he puts it, “the framing of northeast Paris’s ‘sustainable’ redevelopment in the media and by policy makers has taken the character of a class-based, ethnoracial, and civilization-based project” (p.128). Thus, Newman asks: “A sustainable northeast Paris—for whom?” (p.126).

The last two chapters bring us back to the everyday life of the park and the ways citizenship is negotiated in it. In Chapter 5 Newman demystifies Jane Jacobs’s (1993: 11) “eyes upon the street” idea and instead suggests that residents watch park users in the big and open esplanade not necessarily to provide security but also to re-define the boundaries of citizenship. Fueled by fears of “delinquents”, which often seem to be youths of immigrant origins in the popular imagination, park denizens, through the daily usage of the space, have given rise to what

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Newman, in this journal, terms “vigilant citizenship” (see Newman 2013).¹ “Instead of watching the space for ‘undesirables’”, he notes, “residents practice vigilance by struggling in often tiresome and time-consuming efforts to conjure an idealized public to fill the space, month after month, lest ‘delinquents’ appropriate it instead” (p.151). Lastly, Chapter 6 turns to various political struggles that have resurfaced in the *Jardins d’Éole*. Newman discusses the extent to which this particular “urban commons” has become an important site for undocumented immigrants, residents of northeast Paris, and government officials to redefine “*who decides* the boundaries between public/private, and whose needs such divisions serve” (p.169, emphasis added).

Through a careful examination of the everyday life of the *Jardins d’Éole* and its political, economic, and cultural relationship with neighborhood, city, regional, and global forces, Newman successfully illustrates the complex scalar politics that constitute the contested everyday existence of contemporary (global) cities. For that reason alone, geographers should engage with him seriously. However, there are three interrelated themes that consistently run through *Landscape of Discontent* which critical and radical geographers will find particularly interesting and stimulating as they read this timely book: [i] the urban commons; [ii] actually existing republicanism; and [iii] urban sustainability. I will briefly discuss how these three themes play out in the book with the hope that I can further convince you that *Landscape of Discontent* should be in the bookshelf of anyone seriously committed to the “right to the city”.

Newman draws a key conceptual distinction between “the urban commons” and “public space”, preferring the former in order to highlight the “political potential of urban space as a site of democratic protest and social transformation”, while the latter term is exclusively employed as an “architectural classification to refer to squares, plazas, and parks built for ‘public’ use”

¹ Also see Newman talking about his paper on AntipodeFoundation.org – <http://wp.me/p16RPC-Cw>

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(p.xxxvi). The term “urban commons” is strategically used in the book to denote the politics of “inhabiting” over “habitat”, for “only residents, artists, and activists can create an urban commons through inhabiting it, imbuing it with meaning, and using it for their own projects” (p.xxxvii). The redefinition of “republicanism” was one of the projects which residents, visitors, and city officials consistently attempted to “landscape” in the *Jardins d’Éole*. This struggle took the form of demands over sustainability and the creation of an ecological space to ensure equity and justice. The coupling of the politics of sustainability with republicanism in the *Jardins d’Éole* is a novel perspective through which to look at the contested relationship between France and its postcolonial subjects.

Newman details the *Éole* mobilization during the 1990s and 2000s, which was led by middle-income residents from French and Maghrebi origins and, later, lower-income West Africans. This movement was based on the need, as defined by the group, to turn the *Cour du Maroc* into a public garden “oriented toward a civic ecology” (p.47). The *Jardins d’Éole* spatialized that ideal as evident by a community garden run by residents in the park. Open to anyone willing to cultivate, the garden “becomes a crucible of sorts for a hybridization that resonates with basic republican tenets such as ‘civility’ and equal participation, embodied by balanced reciprocity in exchanging seeds and gardening know-how” (p.88). These practices, moreover, actively rejected dominant “monocultural notions of Frenchness that underlie both assimilationist and even integrationist articulations of republicanism” (p.88). With this and other examples of the daily life of the *Jardins d’Éole*, the author demonstrates the “attempt to reappropriate the ecology of the postindustrial city as a medium of social, cultural, and national transformation” (p.194). Furthermore, Newman clearly shows that “republicanism is a dynamic field that is always subject to mediation, contestation, and negotiation; most of all, the meaning of it is *lived* and *fought over* in a multiethnic, urban context” (p.195, emphasis added).

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The recent tragic events of *Charlie Hebdo* and the urban revolts that swept through Paris's *banlieues* and other French cities in 2005 have revived debates over the poor integration of France's immigrant communities and their "unwillingness" to accept the values of the Republic—summarized in the country's motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Anxieties over "unruly" immigrant youths have legitimized a series of repressive, and at times undemocratic, measures designed to better police, contain, and exclude a population that is seen as a threat to the "universal" values of the Republic. By looking at the daily politics of a "small place" like the *Jardins d'Éole*, Newman is able to show how these anxieties are routinely negotiated in the city. But by moving beyond discourse analysis, Newman forcefully demonstrates that there is not one single definition of republicanism, as is often espoused by politicians after tragic events, nor do residents—whether French or foreign born—adhere to one single definition of how to politically relate in France. Rather, contests over the "urban commons"—spaces that are always in a state of "becoming" (p.188)—illustrate the varying and contradictory definitions of "actually existing republicanism" which are "landscaped" in the city. More importantly, contestations over the "nature" and "ecology" of the city could be the seeds of a "radical republicanism". As Newman observes, the community garden in the *Jardins d'Éole* "gives rise to ways of abiding, exchange, and creativity that transcend multiple cultures, and yet it belongs to no particular one" (p.88). Urban political ecologists, public space scholars, political geographers, and critical and radical geographers more generally will find a renewed sense of hope after reading *Landscape of Discontent*, a book that reminds us that "smaller, less spectacular sites of creativity, possibility, and even potential transformation emerge around us all the time" (p.200). Ecological urban struggles are a fruitful and potential radical terrain for claiming the "right to the city" of contradictory and competing groups in the city. Newman simply reminds us that these struggles are already happening. As critical scholars, the book emphasizes, we must be mindful of the

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mundane spaces of everyday life for therein might lie the radical potential of cities. The book is a must-read for those of us committed to a more just and better urban future.

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