

Barbara Berglund. *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xviii + 294 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1530-8.

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The Closing of the (Urban) West

An expansive urban metropolis with a long and colorful history, today San Francisco stands as one of the more cosmopolitan and tolerant cities in the United States. Yet, as Barbara Berglund points out in her new study of the City by the Bay, this was not always the case. Arguing that the modern heterogeneous landscape of this city grew out of a process of negotiation between disparate and divided groups separated by class, race, and gender, *Making San Francisco American* presents the story of an evolving community as a contested landscape. Ultimately, the author provides a detailed, elegant, and convincing explanation of how San Francisco evolved from a wild and woolly frontier boomtown into “a civilized, conquered, and thus fully American place” that, with only a few extremely minor quibbles, stands as an excellent example of urban growth in the nineteenth century (p. 217).

Berglund argues that both inclusion and exclusion are states that are culturally negotiated, and, until the turn of the twentieth century, identity in San Francisco was contested as middle-class and elite residents, “desirous of a social order more in keeping with nationally dominant hierarchies of gender, race and class,” attempted to bring it into alignment with “mainstream” American cultural structures (p. 30). In the world of the nineteenth-century San Franciscan elite, the state of the city was continuously measured against the image of the gold rush years and frequently found wanting, thus leading to an ongoing reshaping of the city’s cultural sites in an attempt to evolve from a frontier community into an American

metropolis. This reshaping is best demonstrated through an exploration of five cultural frontiers and the role they played in the social and cultural evolution of the city. In Berglund’s analysis, these key frontiers—restaurants, hotels, and boarding houses; places of amusement; Chinatown’s tourist terrain; the Mechanic’s Institute’s annual fairs; and the California Midwinter International Exposition—bring “a new level of understanding ... by illuminating the intersection of nation-making and culture in nineteenth-century San Francisco” (p. 14). In the hands of one less gifted and capable, such an argument and methodology might have degenerated into a series of vignettes detailing how the elite of the city imposed their will on an unwilling populace. But, fortunately for readers, Berglund is more than capable, and her subtle and respectful treatment of her cultural frontiers evolves from a simple story of class-, race-, and gender-based contestation into an elegant story of how San Francisco became “American.”

Each cultural frontier is examined in depth in turn, illustrating how cultural identity was negotiated among all groups. Berglund begins by examining travelogues and national publications to understand how restaurants, hotels, and boarding houses acted as sites of contestation. From the early boomtown years in which the gender disparity, frontier conditions, and basic needs forced the populace to adopt “gold-rush inspired egalitarianism,” elites within the city worked to emphasize their vision of socially and culturally appropriate mixing, culminating in the construction of the elegant Palace Hotel,

which “distinguished and separated the elite from their social inferiors, both literally and symbolically” (pp. 26, 43). Likewise, Berglund closely examines places where the populace found its amusements; the author notes that the Barbary Coast, Woodward’s Gardens, and the Pacific Museum of Anatomy and Science were all founded in the 1860s and each occupied a different position on a “virtuous-to-vicious continuum” (p. 59). Yet each site’s corresponding rise and fall serves to illustrate the cultural terrain upon which the city’s elites attempted to shape San Francisco into their own vision of a cosmopolitan, American metropolis. Frequently, the cultural meanings of these sites shifted as the national cultural hierarchy gained more ground in San Francisco. Typical was the meaning of the Pacific Museum; when founded in the 1860s its “promotion of marriage, stable families, and sexual moderation” furthered forms of social order desirable to the middle class and elites in the city (pp. 93-94). However, by the turn of the century, national shifts in morality, the professionalization of medicine, and concern over public displays of immorality had rendered the museum a threat to the established cultural order, and the site was closed in the 1910s. By exploring not only the uses but also the meanings of these sites, Berglund is able to bring the actual evolution of culture in the city to the forefront.

It is in the third chapter, treating the city’s Chinatown as a site of cultural and racial contestation, that this work truly comes into its own. San Francisco’s Chinatown acted not only as a site in which whites encountered Chinese inhabitants and from which “many whites came away with what they believed were social truths about this new immigrant group,” but also as a site in which many Chinese people negotiated their own distinct power within a racially hostile environment (p. 97). To support her overarching argument, Berglund could have merely detailed the way elite travelers conducted “tourist trips” through Chinatown, utilizing local Chinese and white guides, and the cultural understandings they reached as a result of the sights seen. But, the author goes one step beyond; the voices of Chinese residents of the city, while maybe not as direct as those of the white majority, are recovered, and Berglund details the reactions of Chinatown inhabitants to the invaders in their midst. In this manner, the cultural frontier of Chinatown becomes truly contested; for example, while white tourists visited Chinese theaters and recorded their impressions, the tourists themselves were frequently seated on stage, thus becoming part of the theater’s performance for a Chinese audience. Identity, power, and cultural meaning become truly reciprocal as

both racial groups utilized the physical space of the other to not only define that other but also define themselves.

This, then, is perhaps the strongest aspect of Berglund’s work, namely, the ability to illustrate that, while cultural evolution in the nineteenth century was intended to make San Francisco “American,” it was simultaneously hegemonic and non-hegemonic. Across the decades, as the city’s elites celebrated the progress their community had attained the more apparent it became that the city had traded the unique problems of its boomtown years for the widespread chaos of the late nineteenth century. When the Mechanic’s Institute initiated the first of its fairs, a yearly social and cultural gathering that lasted almost throughout the entirety of the nineteenth century, the organizers not only intended to present a local celebration of San Franciscan progress, but also “disseminated a recipe for the way the family and the economy could be structured to create a city ordered according to quintessentially American variants of capitalist, republican, and patriarchal values” (pp. 139-140). By providing a cultural site where these values could be emphasized, organizers were reacting to the chaotic social order of the gold rush years and attempting to provide a popular forum in which their social and cultural vision could be articulated. However, contemporary disorder in their ultimate expression of the city’s civilization, the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition, indicates that this hegemonic view was still a work in progress, as the exposition’s emphasis on orientalist architecture, the revisionist vision of the ’49 mining camp exhibit, the gender politics of women at the fair as workers and visitors, and the economic tensions between different social classes at the event attest. On the one hand, the differing uses and social disorder apparent at the fair indicates that the hegemonic vision of the exposition’s organizers was not fully accepted by both the fair’s workers and visitors; yet, on the other hand, the social and cultural disorder apparent at the exposition indicates that the fair was definitely a product of America as a nation, given the economic depression, political unrest, and labor agitation prevalent during the 1890s.

Through almost three hundred pages, Berglund presents a sophisticated argument, one that adds to our understanding of the development of San Francisco into a thoroughly modern American city. Still, significant questions come to mind: foremost, is Berglund’s analysis one that can be extended to other urban locales in nineteenth-century North America, or were the cultural dynamics of the city unique only to Gilded Age California? In this period, New York City certainly received

more than its share of immigrants, Chicago had an extensive and extended labor crisis, Populism could be found throughout western states and territories, and the attempts by women to reconcile their place in the public sphere was prevalent throughout the whole of the United States. Could the arguments presented in this work be extended to nineteenth-century Philadelphia, Atlanta, or Deadwood in the Dakota Territory?

Conversely, at times it almost seems as though the city exists within its own unique echo chamber, as events that have an impact on the national fabric do not seem to have any profound impact on the city of San Francisco as a whole. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of profound sociocultural shifts, with labor unrest in western mining camps during the 1870s and 1880s, post-Civil War racial emancipation and oppressive backlash of Jim Crow laws, and urban industrialization forcing changes in the way people related to one another in the United States. Did these shifts have any effect on busi-

ness/labor relations in the city or relations between white and black San Franciscans? Given the ubiquitous disorder throughout the United States in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the purported “goal” of hierarchical hegemony on the part of the city’s elites, it is surprising that this work does not make more of national shifts in culture.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that the above is not specifically the author’s goal, and perhaps this is a complaint that holds little water when compared to the smooth methodology and solid conclusions of this work. Ultimately, then, *Making San Francisco American* is the story of how the cultural fabric of the city evolved from a state of heterogeneous chaos to a state in which the city was thoroughly “American.” The dynamic story of this evolution will prove a valuable addition to any scholar of urban development, or just about any course concentrating on cultural development and social tensions in nineteenth-century United States.

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