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Reseña de "Bargaining for Brooklyn: Community Organizations in the Entrepreneurial City" de Nicole P. Marwell
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Nicole Marwell provides an excellent community history of Puerto Ricans and Latinos in Brooklyn. She explains their ability and inability to advance economically and politically as a function of the roles played by community based organizations (CBOs). Marwell participated in and observed the activities of eight CBOs in Williamsburg and Bushwick, two Brooklyn communities with very large Latino populations. This original study improves on the Chicago ecological school by giving a constructive role to intermediary organizations such as CBOs. It offers an account of Latino community organizational history in the late 1990s, which is richly detailed and likely to serve as a wonderful resource for future research.

Marwell addresses classic and thorny questions about agency and social structure by focusing on the intermediary role played by CBOs that link individual residents to “the economic and political fields operating in the city and beyond” (p. 231). These social organizations create “social fields” that constrain and enable the activities of community residents. This is a useful and important analytic model, and its application to Latino organizations in Brooklyn was fascinating and successful. Though this study provides an effective antidote to the popular wisdom that poor people, including Latinos, are mostly responsible for their plight, in some ways it raises more questions than it answers.

*Bargaining* is packed with historical and organizational information on such little studied but legendary Latino groups as Los Sures in Williamsburg and the Ridgewood-Bushwick Senior Citizens Council. These and other CBOs have engaged in a variety of strategies to provide housing, public services, and paid work to community residents. With varying degrees of success, some CBOs constructed patron-recipient relationships with politicians, while others acted more as a disruptive force incorporating resident mobilization and protest. Some have had a considerable measure of success in constructing housing options for the poor, providing employment, as well as placing the needs of the poor and Latino on the wider political agenda. The irony is that success often helped to produce failure.

Marwell writes about how the success of Los Sures CBO in providing low-income housing and preserving the Williamsburg community was not enough to prevent the reentry and dominance of the capital growth machine. Indeed, Los Sures may have made Williamsburg more attractive to pioneering and wealthier newcomers. In the late 1990s, banks and real estate interests rediscovered the residential value of Williamsburg. Their investment decisions constricted the ability of Los Sures to continue to serve the needs of low-income Latino residents. In some ways, then, the heroic efforts of Los Sures during the 1980s to improve housing conditions for the poor merely preserved the Williamsburg housing stock for future gentrification. This experience suggests some real lessons about the limitations of CBOs as collective agents of change.

Marwell admits that CBOs have limited power. In the context of capital, real estate, and government power, “CBOs routinely find themselves the least powerful players” (p. 234). Marwell insists that CBOs are nonetheless capable of
effectively negotiating on behalf of the poor if they can strengthen their ability to perform within larger fields while remaining accountable to the poor. Here, the experience of the Hasidim community of Williamsburg is particularly instructive.

Hasidic and Orthodox Jews form a significant sector of the population in Williamsburg. Like Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, the Hasidic Jews are very poor. They have large families and, as individual households, don’t make a lot of money. Despite their poverty and cultural difference, Hasidic Jews proved to be formidable competitors for housing and other scarce resources in Williamsburg. They had access to more private capital, stronger political unity, and greater “access to the mayor’s office” (p. 71). As a result, the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg won important court battles and reshaped zoning laws to their advantage. Their community has expanded in Williamsburg while the Latino community has shrunk. A major reason for their success compared to Los Sures is, as Marwell claims, that they are tightly organized around one “central authority” and, as a community, have access to “significant sources of capital” (p. 92). These are significant advantages. They don’t, however, tell the whole story.

Marwell does a careful job of explaining how CBOs like Los Sures attempt to connect their constituents to the larger world. Aside from the Mayor’s office, HUD officials, and bankers, Los Sures often acted to “sway public opinion” and decision makers to address Latino needs (p. 221). It’s possible, however, that many of their failures to move the public and decision makers has less to do with the organizational abilities and financial resources of Los Sures and more with the socially defined role and perception of Latinos in the wider society. These aspects of social culture are not in the direct control of any of these social actors.

Los Sures has an incredible history of providing Latinos with housing and educational resources in Williamsburg. As early as the 1970s, Los Sures already had hundreds of low-income housing units under its management using the city’s Community Management Program. Los Sures, Marwell showed, also pioneered and developed low-income tenant cooperatives. By the late 1990s, there were over a thousand, mostly Latino, residents living in units the city had sold to a tenant association. Each tenant purchased ownership of an apartment at a very low price. This ownership arrangement kept costs down and made inexpensive housing available to the Latino poor. It eventually proved to be, however, one of the factors that undermined the success of Los Sures. Increasingly, older, Latino cooperative apartment owners, seeking to retire to Puerto Rico or to the Dominican Republic, sold their shares to Hasidic people who offered tidy buyout offers. There was little that Los Sures could do to stop this practice.

CBOs can, in this sense, make a difference for its members and even produce significant local triumphs. But maybe they can do so only as long as their objectives align, in some less understood way, with the dominant norms and practices that establish the prevailing stratification pattern for different ethnic and racial groups in this society. Thus, what may have been most important in this Williamsburg story was the fact that the Hasidim were cultural and political refugees from Eastern Europe. Puerto Ricans and Latinos were mostly economic refugees.

Transplanted to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, these communities were marginalized in very different ways from the politics, culture, and economics of this country. What brought Puerto Ricans to New York City in the 1950s, for example, was their compliant ability to do wage-labor at very cheap levels. This was both a
product of the colonial situation in Puerto Rico and the strategic planning of various Puerto Rican and U.S. government offices.

Unlike the Hasidic experience, these mostly economic conditions created a historically intractable path for Puerto Ricans that encouraged individual wage-labor and limited their ability to act as one coherent, collective whole. But these are exactly the conditions that are not easily overcome by good CBO performance. The fact that there were, at least, eight CBOs (according to this study) striving to represent the needs of Puerto Rican and Latino residents in these communities is a good indication of the fragmentation that characterizes Latino community life.

If the Hasidim community has access to capital not easily available to the Latino community, it is primarily because religious obligations mean that Hasidim rely a great deal on self-employment and work with other Orthodox Jews. They may not make a lot of money as individuals, but business ownership can serve as collateral and can be pooled for collective projects and needs. Hasidic religious doctrine also makes the rebbe a central religious and community authority. Those religious and economic realities create a relationship to the larger society wherein the Hasidim can be counted on by politicians to deliver votes and campaign contributions. Their ability to raise capital for housing and local development is greatly facilitated and made less complicated by their collective organization under a rebbe. This makes them exceedingly attractive to banks. No amount of organization or strategic planning and action by Latino CBOs can match this Hasidic ability to easily satisfy the inherent needs and concerns of politicians and financial institutions.

This is not all lost on Marwell. She does seem to have an implicit awareness that non-local factors are often better positioned to shape communities than local organizations. She does recognize that the federal War on Poverty programs of the 1960s delivered millions of dollars and created scores of CBOs in Williamsburg. This federal response to segregation, urban race riots, and Kennedy’s assassination transformed the urban landscape in Williamsburg from the outside. While local Brooklyn organizations like Youth-in-Action served as models for the federal Community Action Program, it was clearly, as Marwell points out, a newly receptive public as well as a newly minted federal commitment that delivered public and private dollars into community development (p. 29).

The problem for Marwell’s model is that it cannot easily incorporate the reality that external forces are often more important than local CBOs in shaping community development. More critical is that Marwell views all federal policies as the product of official decisions. If federal policy shifts funds away from local development, she believes that it is because they have given “priority to the needs and desires of other places and of groups that are better organized or have greater resources” (p. 7). She admits that much of what affects the lives of community residents originates in “settings far from their homes, street corners, and neighborhoods” (p. 6). These are, however, constructed as decisions made by individuals rather than as structural and historical forces.

There is great methodological value in being reminded that the feds make decisions and policies just like local organizations. Federal policies can thus be “traced to the specific actions of real people out there in the world” (p. 6). The problem is not the uniformity between what happens at the local and the federal levels but accounting for how the decisions and actions taken by all levels
accretes and results in something unintended by anyone. As Marx once pointed out, what is not settled in this study is an accounting of how decisions and actions, much of it from the past, create a tradition “of all dead generations” that can weigh “like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

Marwell makes many enduring contributions to our understanding of individual and collective efficacy in the modern city. There is no doubt that CBOs have a significant and mostly positive role to play in increasing the opportunities for community residents to negotiate the often treacherous features of the urban landscape. Marwell does an effective job of explaining these possibilities in two Brooklyn communities. Her historical explanations are innovative and useful to organizers and activists in the urban fold. It falls short, however, of fully accounting for the forces that sweep through any community and that shape the personal and collective trajectories of its residents.

Spanish Harlem’s Musical Legacy: 1930–1980
By Silvio H. Alava
128 pages; $19.95 [paper]

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To those who know and love the Afro-Caribbean musical contribution to United States culture, the images in Silvio H. Alava’s book Spanish Harlem’s Musical Legacy, 1930–1980, will be a delight. The majority of the photographs in this book capture exciting moments featuring immensely creative, innovative, and substantial musical characters. With some exceptions, the images portray figures that have played seminal roles in the development of American music. Many readers will experience the thrill of recognition and evocation. Some pictures will trigger memories of personal experiences and historical events in the minds of those who had the fortune of seeing these musicians perform live. I’m certain that followers of Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Mongo Santamaría, and Ray Barretto are even likely to recall the music that was played at the time the pictures were taken.

The quality of the photos is uneven but the reader must remember that Alava was not a professional photographer. This book is not about the pictures anyway, but about the musicians it portrays. Pictures freeze a moment in time but in this book it is possible to see time passing as one looks at a photo of a young musician next to his image 20 or 30 years later. The fascinating thing about these juxtapositions is that they show no sign of diminished vitality by the subjects. Tito Puente, for example, looks as dynamic in 1959 doing coro next to Santitos Colón and Chickie Pérez as he does in 1985 playing the timbales next to Cachao. In another example, a young Johnny Pacheco can be seen using almost the exact same fingering on his flute as Eddie Zervigón is in a picture taken 20 years later. Two different flutists, two different moments in time, perhaps two different songs being played. In that particular moment they were either playing the same note, about to play the same note, or about to hit a different one after playing the same note. It is impossible to know for sure but the symmetry of the juxtaposition is gratifying and provocative.

The book is organized into four sections, each representing a different category. One key problem with the first section, “The Immortals,” is that it includes pictures of only four artists—Celia Cruz, Noro Morales, Benny Moré, and Arsenio Rodríguez.