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Chinatown: The Ethnopole as an Informal Capital City

The development of Japantown and Manilatown in San Francisco was in one form or another influenced by the existence of Chinatown, the first Asian-American ethnopole in the city. Anglo-Californians developed their prejudices against Asian Americans based on the early model of their interaction with nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants. Various debilitating forms of racism – the manipulation of the legal system to create and maintain a space of difference, racial discrimination, housing segregation, covenant clauses to prevent integration, and spatial ghettoization – that the constructed mainstream system used to marginalize the Chinese newcomers were time and again applied to subalternize both Filipino Americans and Japanese Americans. The fates of these three minoritized groups seemed tied to one another as each followed a different path of development and each exhibited variations in the ways in which it dealt with the mainstream. Since its birth as an ethnopole, however, Chinatown has emerged as the preeminent informal capital city for the larger Chinese population in Northern California in particular and a symbolic capital city for Chinese Americans in general.

I conceptualize Chinatown as an informal capital city to suggest its subalternization vis-à-vis the city it is enclosed in, its minoritization by the mainstream, its racialization by way of its forced marginal spatialization, and its global status in a network of transnational sites. “Informality” here means that the enclave is seen as a pole of a continuum precisely because it is part of a subjugated network of sites that intersects and crisscrosses the formal network of sites, but does not coincide with it. Informality is symbolic of the racial displacement and reinsertion of the ethnopole in a different spatial order. It shows how racism – in its local, transnational, and global forms – disorders the
natural order of things and respatializes it by way of renaturalizing it in a new constructed order. Chinatown is a capital city in a peculiar way, not because every Chinese American considers it as a capital, but because city hall and local entrepreneurs project it as such. However, this social construction of Chinatown as an informal city is not simply or solely a project of outsiders; it has also an internal basis of support. After all, it is the first and best-known Chinese site in the United States, the center of an array of formal and informal social institutions, a world-renowned business district, the headquarters of transnational family associations, the place of residence of a significant number of Chinese Americans – both old-timers and newcomers – and a meeting-place for Chinese Americans in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. It is recognized by every measure imaginable to be the densest Chinese enclave in the United States.\(^\text{33}\) I use the informal capital-city concept to refer to its unequal cultural, economic, and political importance for the Chinese population in relation to other sites in Northern California, and to refer to its role as the principal symbol commoditized and used by city administrators, local businesspeople, and Chinese entrepreneurs to entice non-residential shoppers and national and foreign tourists to the ethnopole.\(^\text{34}\)

It is a truism to argue that global racism is \textit{global} to the extent that it is locally contextualized, situated, historicized, and experienced. Contemporary San Francisco’s Chinatown presents an ideal site to study the \textit{translocalization} of global racism. Three questions are addressed here: (1) how the globalization process has been an important factor in the reproduction of Chinatown as an informal capital city; (2) how the selling of Chinatown on a global scale as a tourist site has reinforced its status as a \textit{racialized ethnopole}; and (3) how global events – President Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, the 1975 fall of Saigon, and the 1997 annexation or return of Hong Kong to China – have further transformed it into a \textit{symbolic site} of US global racist practices.

Since this introduces a new concept, it is appropriate to define and conceptualize it so as to identify and explain the parameters within which its meanings are constructed:

\textit{Global racism is the behavioral and ideological practice that is prejudicial to the phenotypically different other and that has multilocal or transnational ramifications. Its translocality is the cornerstone of its manifestation.}

In the history of the ethnopole, global racism presents itself as a translocal mechanism that implodes in the initial phase of the birth of