A Study of Space in the Novel *Ragtime*

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The novel *Ragtime*, written by the contemporary American writer Edgar Lawrence Doctorow, imaginatively reconstructs the urban space in the Progressive Era. In the period of social transformation and change, all kinds of contradictions in New York City are becoming increasingly acute. The division of space reflects the power discourse of different classes, races, and genders. The connection, extension and expansion of space promote the features of urban modernity and open up new patterns of social behavior and opportunities for survival, but cannot fundamentally alleviate the capitalist crisis. Spatial layout and distribution of the city are not only the reflection of social relations, but also the “time capsule”, bearing the history of the city, and the writing of space offers a mirror for the author’s emotion and value judgment.

Keywords: Progressive Era, city, space, reconstruction, modernity

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow, an American novelist in the second half of the 20th century, published the novel *Ragtime* in 1975 and the book became the best-seller immediately, won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was adapted into a film. In spite of the high seriousness of the writer, this book achieved great commercial success, and it was ranked as one of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century by the Modern Library. As for the researches on this novel, scholars have focused on the issues such as being historical or fictional, movie and music medium, source of the story, etc. The novel is set before World War I, a time called the Progressive Era, which extends from 1890 to 1920 when “modern America was really born” (Piott, 2011, p. xi), and “urbanization, industrialization, immigration as well as women’s emancipation and suffrage caused all kinds of sensations” (Sauter, 2011, p. 19), and social conflicts intensified. Urban spaces in the novel are geographical spaces, and moreover, their distribution and allocation reflect social relations. Bearing the marks of American urban history especially of New York City, spatial writing transmits the writer’s emotion and moral ideas. Along with the rapid urban development, social, spatial and time relations are becoming more and more complicated, so this article intends to explore how Doctorow reconstructs urban spaces in the Progressive Era in *Ragtime* and its implicit social changes, writer’s ideas and value orientation.

Urban Space as a Hub of Conflicts and Power Discourse

The city is a space full of various conflicts, especially for New York City. As a modern international metropolis of America, New York City has all kinds of ethnic groups from all over the world, and it inevitably becomes a heterotopia full of contradictions. The Progressive Era was a transitional period, when conflicts became acute in New York City because of social transformation toward the modern, and the division of space in that era mirrors the power discourse of different classes, races and genders.

Growing up in New York City and being familiar with its spatial forms and geography, Doctorow in his novel *Ragtime* drew a space map of the City during the Progressive Era based on historical facts, showing his insight on social issues. “Spatial design is a political tool to achieve social control” (Gottdiener, 2014, p. 130), for power determines the planning, supervision and management of urban space. At the end of the 19th century, the layout of New York City was formed as a result of the planning of government, and Manhattan streets were designed as a chessboard pattern, which demonstrated the operation of power and reflected rationality and order of modern cities. Struggle for power was carried out through the distribution and occupation of spaces, planners and capitalists possessing advantaged spaces, and those without power and position were placed in disadvantaged areas. “Urbanization has always been a class phenomenon” (Harvey, 2012, p. 5), and different social classes have different spaces. The best areas are occupied by financial tycoons, commercial and political VIPs. The white marble mansion lived by Morgan who is “at the top of business pyramid” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 143) is located at the center of New York City, i.e., Madison Avenue, parallel to the Fifth Avenue and adjacent to the Morgan Library, where stand many palace-like buildings and gather the most powerful Americans and élites, and space has become a symbol for power and social position. The third chapter of the novel depicts high-grade decorative goods being unloaded at the docks which are definitely to be enjoyed by upper classes, including marbles, silver and gold plate, “whole facades of Florentine palaces and Athenian atria, stone by marked stone” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 19), silk wall panels and so on.

Industrial revolution led to unparalleled prosperity in the Progressive Era, but they didn’t bring comfortable life to the laborers. Slums and cheap apartments were the characteristics of American cities at that time, but this fact was covered by the gorgeous surface of the city. According to historical records, two thirds of New Yorkers were living in the rental house, as is unfolded in the third chapter of the novel. Poor laborers were crammed into small apartments which were dark and messy, lacking ventilation and daily water, reeking of shit and food, and illness would easily take their lives. The division of city into blocks and sections shows the surface of the space, while the writer’s depiction of living areas digs into the essence of the city, revealing the true state of lower class people. The investigation of urban living conditions made by Jacob Riis in the novel also has historical basis. Urban historian Mumford in his work *Urban Culture* points out that the big cities are established gradually by exploiting those who live in slums. Doctorow exposes the social injustice mirrored in spatial occupation and division, which actually deconstructs the official discourse and the ideas of democracy and equality that Americans think they could enjoy.

Doctorow exposes the imbalance in urban spatial distribution in many of his works such as *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate*, *The Waterworks*, etc., but *Ragtime* stands out as it deals with a special period when America went through the transition from agricultural society to industrial society. With the development of capitalism, phenomena such as spatial inequality and imbalanced regional development have become increasingly prominent, even leading to “fortified fragments and gated communities” (Harvey, 2012, p. 15), which is the result of the logic of capital and the interests of the ruling class, who occupied and robbed spaces just in order to achieve the maximum surplus values. Geographically uneven development is “in the accumulation process and thereby in the survival and reproduction of capitalism itself” (Soja, 1989, p. 81). Doctorow’s reconstruction of unequal spaces in the Progressive Era shows the acute conflict between the capitalist and working class, which not only happened in New York City but also in the surrounding cities. The Progressive Era is a turbulent era when labor movement rises one after another. In 1912 the textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, who earned only six dollars a week, went for a strike and then all the textile mills were shut

down for a few days. The writer gives a narration of this event with the effect of presenting the tension and confrontation that were widespread in American urban spaces.

The city is not only the place where class differentiation and conflicts are concentrated, but also the focus of contradictions between different ethnic and interest groups. One of the characteristics of New York City space is the division of regions based on various racial groups, such as Jews at Lower East side, blacks at Harlem, and middle-class whites moving from the city center to the North, while rich whites living at the city center. The Progressive Era was characterized by an irresistible increase of immigrants into New York City, not only blacks coming from the South but also many Jews and other ethnic groups immigrating here continuously. Unfortunately New York City was no paradise as they had imagined—immigration officials treating them coldly and absurdly, local people despising them, immigrants from other countries excluding them as well. Racial conflicts become prominent in the latter half of the novel, when the whole urban space was shrouded in violent conflict and panic. The black man Coalhouse Walker came into conflict with the white firefighter and his car was damaged with no reason. In order to seek justice Walker gathered black men together, and they made an explosion at a fire station and occupied the Morgan Library, and “the city went into a panic truly” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 229). Occupying white spaces means a challenge to white hegemony, and Coalhouse chooses to occupy the Morgan Library because he thinks Morgan “represented the power of the white world” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 280). Abolishment of slavery after the civil war failed to bring about a true equality between races, but this fact is seldom mentioned in authoritative discourse, and therefore it becomes necessary to reexamine the history. From the spatial narrative in *Ragtime* we can see that the Jews and the Blacks are treated unfairly and they don’t have enough spaces in New York City, which shows the writer’s profound humanistic sympathy for ethnic minorities.

The distribution of space between men and women in *Ragtime* marks the inequality between the sexes and women’s struggle for equality. Restricted by traditional patriarchal ideology, for a long time women do not have the right for space, and they are considered as the angels in the house, and “women are kept out of the stories altogether until the early 1900s” (Sauter, 2011, p. 85). Because of economic problems and social conventions, they lack job opportunities and freedom of social intercourse, even for the middle-class white women, and public space only belongs to men. The female characters in *Ragtime* are not the center of narration, but the space for a female has begun to expand. Women have access to public spaces at their own will, which indicates the promotion of the status of women, typically represented by the character Emma Goldman, who can enter the Workingmen’s Hall to give a speech about women’s rights. In the early twentieth century there was the beginning of the feminist movement when women tried to break the shackle of space, go out of the family, find work, and their social activities became frequent. However, on the whole, female status was not high at that time. The concept of “New Woman” was questioned and doubted, and American urban women did not gain substantial social rights and lacked real freedom. Compared with white women, black women’s situation is even worse, almost no space for survival, like poor Sara in the novel, who is hardly able to make a living herself. She gave birth to a baby, but being helpless and no one to rely on, she had to bury the baby alive, and in the chaos she died miserably under the buttstock of a policeman, and thus perished her dream for an ideal family space. It was the same fate for Jewish women, like Tateh’s wife, who offered her body in order to earn money to support her family, but at the end she was driven out of the house by her husband, mourned as the dead, for there was no space for her.

Extension, Flow and Change of Urban Spaces in the Progressive Era

The urban space in the novel *Ragtime* is flowing, rather than being static. Faced with the intensification of social conflicts, the authority continues to renew transportation facilities and enhance efficiency in order to overcome spatial distance and quicken capital accumulation, and “eliminate spatial distance through time span” (TANG, 2014, p. 107). They try to extricate from capitalist crisis by spatial connection, extension and expansion, which forms a good explanation of the theory of “spatial-temporal fix” put forward by David Harvey, an urban sociologist and geographer. Harvey thinks that capitalist production would definitely lead to social crisis, but the strategy of “spatial-temporal fix” helps to absorb surplus capitals to keep capitalist system running on the track.

Doctorow pays special attention to the function of transportation in the expansion of New York City. Advancement of vehicles, construction of subways and railways expand the geographical coverage of the city and lay foundation for the urban mobility, and make suburbs prosper and change the urban layout. The novel *Ragtime* abounds with images such as railway, track, subway, electric railroad, locomotive and so on, showing a complicated urban transportation network. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Doctorow mentioned that such detailed description came from a systematic research based on his readings in New York Public Library, especially about “interurban street rail transportation” (Ruas, 1985, p. 201). The rapid construction of railways was a key factor to American social development in the Progressive Era. Statistically in 1870 American railway tracks extended 53 thousand miles, and in 1900 there was 258 thousand miles, in 1920 it came to 407 thousand miles. New types of vehicles connected various parts of New York City which was expanding outwards incessantly, and therefore alleviated the contradiction of limited living space in the original area.

In *Ragtime* the “compression of time and space” changes the way of life and people’s value orientation. According to Harvey’s theory of space-time compression, the time and distance required for human communication in a certain area are shortened with the progress of transportation technology. At the opening of the novel new types of vehicles carry groups of people from one place to other rapidly, and spatial barriers resulted from far distance are broken. With the continual increase of public spaces which represent “social integration and transformation” (Kohn, 2011, p. 82), “new forms of sociality” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 16) begin to spring up. No longer confined at one place, people could drive to distant places within a short time, so frequent meeting, social outings, recreational activities became fashionable at that time, which had only been a dream in the pre-modern society. Spatial changes indicate the change in social behaviors, which fits into Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, which states social activities always happen in a particular space, and it is the space that makes social behavior possible.

Robert Park, an urban sociologist, points out that “the general process of expansion in urban growth involves the antagonistic and yet complimentary processes of concentration and decentralization” (Park, 1967, p. 52). One is the centripetal flow around the city center, and the other is the centrifugal flow that evacuates people to the urban periphery. Along with the enlargement of New York City, Manhattan gradually grew to be the prosperous center of commerce and recreation, with skyscrapers, department stores, recreation center everywhere, while urban periphery became new living areas. Demarcated by the 1920s, the suburbanization of American cities could be divided into the modern and the contemporary periods, and the Progressive Era belongs to the former one.

In *Ragtime* the rapid increase of population and the drastic economic progress push forward the change of the urban layout of the City, not only connecting the districts or nodes inside the city, but also extending to the north to form connection with the surrounding cities which include New Rochelle, Philadelphia, Boston and so on, thus the city belt is formed with New York City as the center. The frequent change of urban spaces in the work present a broader view and the life experiences of various characters. The novel begins with the middle-class family moving north to New Rochelle from New York City. This family is typical of the middle class in the Progressive Era, whose movement could alleviate the spatial confinement of New York City caused by the rapid increase of immigrants. The journey of the Jewish artist in the novel takes him farther exceeding the boundary of New York State. He came to New York from Russia but the terrible reality broke his "American dream". After his wife was expelled he shouldered the responsibility of rearing their daughter. He could barely survive by depending on the art of silhouette. Unable to bear the extreme poverty, he had no choice but to escape the City that brought him bad luck. The enlargement of urban spaces enabled him to go across different cities, New York City, Mount Vernon, Lawrence, Boston, New Haven, New Rochelle, Newark, Philadelphia and finally he went back to New York City. The change of spaces indicates his journey to seek personal identity and realize his dreams. In addition to the change of living spaces for the characters, from the way of narration, the stories of the three families, the white, the black and the Jewish, go along with the movement of space. The non-linear narration breaks through the limitation of time and space, thus enlarging the width and depth of the story.

All in all, the continual influx of immigrants leads to mobility of urban dwellers between different areas, and spatial connection, extension or enlargement pushed forward the further development of the city, bringing more space and opportunities for people to survive, but the fundamental crisis of capitalism cannot be rooted out. On the whole, *Ragtime* gives us a picture of a prosperous New York City at the same time full of crisis.

Bewilderment and Loss of Subjectivity in Modern Urban Space

In the post-industrial society there is a hyperspace which is beyond description, but the novel *Ragtime* presents a modern space that can be measured and located. The writer captures the busy and noisy urban images where numerous lights are flashing in the shops, banquet halls, theaters and on the street, where the sounds of cabs, cars and trucks are heard incessantly. In such a modern urban space, all kinds of social activities here are surging, bringing together different cultural and ethnic groups, and attracting more people to come into this urban space and its civilized system.

"Space is not only a venue for our activities and what we need, but also a historical product with the complicated and hidden meanings" (TONG, 2011, p. 165). Historically the urban space made great leaps during the Progressive Era due to the reform of President Theodore Roosevelt. At the end of 19th century monopoly organization gained important position in national economy. In 1901 when Roosevelt became the president, he pushed forward a series of reforms, enhancing the federal government's supervision and control, keeping the US economy going well. However what will a modernized and industrialized city bring to human beings, awful fate or unlimited opportunities?

"The city is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity" (Stevenson, 2007, p. 80). According to Baudelaire modernity is characterized as being short, instantaneous, and accidental. Modern city life is full of randomness and unpredictability, and everything seems to be floating. Human beings' fate is decided and limited by urban space, and it is difficult to find their own space, which was particularly obvious for the

Russian immigrants who had been used to traditional handicraft industry and slow-paced lifestyle. The Jewish artist in the novel was full of curiosity when he arrived at this metropolis, and then he was caught in the conflict between the traditional and the modern. Feeling sad and even resentful, faced up with personal and religious crisis, he was typically bewildered by the rapid change of New York City. Traditional art of silhouette could not support his life, and he had to emerge into the “lines of flow of American energy” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 140), adapting to and using modern technology, devoting into new industry, and then he became an entrepreneur in film-making and his living situation dramatically changed. During such a transitional period, the manual workers became obsolete, and the middle-class whites exemplified by the father in *Ragtime* were also faced with the crisis of subjectivity, because he fell into the “unchanging pattern” (Busby, 2000, p. 180) and failed to adapt to the rapidly-changing modern society. So he became low-spirited after returning from the expedition to the Arctic and later was eliminated completely.

In addition to the conflict between tradition and modernity, *Ragtime* also represents the status of individual in a systematic urban space. Being closely related to the modernization processes, urban modernity is embodied in ideas, cultures and social structures: a secular world defeating the divine, acceleration of the flow of market, commodity and labor, and a corresponding modern management system coming into being. Modernity is closely connected with technological progress. At the end of the 19th century technology progress made America the most powerful country in industrial and agricultural production, and in 1880 about 80% of mechanical workers were working in modern factories which took the place of manual workshops as the major working space. In 1894 America's industrial output exceeded that of Britain which enjoyed the reputation of “world factory”, and became number one in the world. Using new industrial technologies, “the nature of work and labor process altered radically, characterized by the decline of artisanship, a reorganization of skills, and the development of a modern, wage-labor working class” (Katznelson, 1992, p. 13).

In the early 20th century, the automobile production line created by Henry Ford typically represented the dramatic progress in modern technology and organized working system. Ford's organized working mode greatly reduced the cost and promoted production efficiency and quantity of products. Automobile industry soon grew as one of the pillar industries in America, and the popularization of assembly line and cars facilitated the connection between different urban spaces. At the same time, the mass production with machines intensified the conflict between the capital and labor, and the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the working class became increasingly sharp. Ford tried to reform the society through high-efficiency machines, and he “established the final proposition of the theory of industrial manufacture—not only that the parts of the finished product be interchangeable, but that the men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 142). The machines kept running and circulating incessantly in modern working space, but workers were reduced as a part of the machine or just a simple machine, waiting to be replaced by someone else at anytime. Characterized by its working division and specialization, “Fordism” greatly sped up the production, but in this standardized management system workers were kept doing simple mechanical labor at separate spaces, losing their individuality and subjectivity. Under the supervision of capitalists, workers worked hard aiming only to enhance efficiency. Regarding the relation between the individual and the system of modern society the scholar Tong Qiang in his book *Spatial Philosophy* points out that modern spaces are highly organized, human beings under systematic control, and the individuals depending on such a social system cooperate with each other. However, the sociologist Max Weber perceives the problem of social system saying that “the organization system of modern society has become a huge mechanical monster that restricts

human freedom” (BAO, 2003, p. 135). So individuals are deprived of right and position in a city and cannot control their own fate. Undoubtedly Doctorow pays more attention to human fate in the systematic space and production, and he refutes the loss of human subjectivity.

Urban Space and the Reconstruction of Memory

The urban spaces such as Manhattan and Bronx, where Doctorow was born and lived and worked, provide the writer with valuable materials for literary creation, forever inspiring him and spurring his imagination. Doctorow was born in 1931 at the Lower East Side of New York City and the bankruptcy of his father led the family into a hard time, an experience that has dented into the writer’s memory and deepened his understanding of the life of lower-middle-class people and Jewish culture. He attended primary and middle school in Bronx, where Jewish dwellers took a large proportion, and later he worked as an editor and university teacher for a long time at Manhattan. Therefore for Doctorow these are not only geographical places but also the homelands loaded with specific cultural atmosphere and his personal memory.

Though the various areas such as Manhattan and Bronx are presented in the novels such as *World’s Fair* and *Billy Bathgate*, *Ragtime* mainly focuses on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. The writer’s affection for this space comes not only from his personal experience but also from the history of Jewish immigrants. “Doctorow is more concerned with imaginative truth than with historical accuracy” (Levine, 1985, p. 17). Though he has not experienced the Progressive Era, the description about the Lower East Side is definitely based on history and his recollection about the past. The memory is selective since “memory and imagination would have been informed either by previous experience of this particular place” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 68). The space acts as the “time capsule” (FENG, 2013, p. 91) and it can arouse the feeling of intimacy in the mind of the person who once lived at this space. *Ragtime* intentionally depicts Hester Street where it is crowded with peddlers, carts and different kinds of people. And this street was the first choice for Jewish artists who came into New York for the first time. Peddlers and street artists walk to and fro in the street and sell different kinds of products at low prices just for survival. For the lower-class people the street is an open space where they can enjoy more freedom and it has become a major place for their activities. Hester Street has a special meaning for the Jews because it symbolizes the beginning of their life in America and the painstaking process of starting their business. In *Ragtime* all the Jewish characters don’t have names, with only an introduction of their identity, and it is obvious that the writer does not focus on any one particular person but points toward all the Jews, with the intention of reminding the interpreters of history not to ignore the history of Jewish immigrants. The writer Doctorow is a Jew of the third generation, and his Jewish family background and personal experience at the Lower East Side in his early years endow him with profound feelings for this area, so it is not accidental that he chooses here as the background for his novels. Dating back to the late 19th century and early 20th century, Jews fled Europe and settled mainly at the Lower East Side when they arrived in America, so this area became extremely meaningful both for the writer and other Jewish descendants. But with the development of the city and the acceleration of mobility, sense of local place is falling into crisis. Doctorow’s reconstruction of the Lower East Side carries his memory of Jewish immigrants and an acceptance of his personal identity, and “the recalling of history has become a method to establish a national identity” (Assmann, 2016, p. 80).

Jewish people made great contribution to the urban development in America with their diligence and wisdom, and a lot of people took bad-conditioned, arduous and low-paid work for a long time, but these were ignored or underestimated in the authoritative narration in which they were regarded as the “Other”. When Ford

met Morgan he assumed that the “Jews, they ain’t like anyone else” (Doctorow, 1975, p. 153). Definitely such an anti-semitic view is to be negated by the writer. With a strong sense of homeland and history, his reconstruction of Jewish areas and Jewish history remind the contemporary people not to forget the past. Doctorow insists that people should acknowledge traditional Jewish culture and historical contribution of Jews, which fully reflects his profound Jewish concern.

As a writer in the post-industrial era, Doctorow in his novel *Ragtime* imaginarily reconstructs New York City in the Progressive Era based firmly on the writer’s urban experience, his memory of New York City and his grasp of the City’s historical facts. As American scholar Tamar Katz points out, memory makes us “acquire a truly urban identity” and makes us “reconsider the importance of both loss and the past for urban life” (Katz, 2010, p. 810). Memory is not only related to history but also closely connected with the time of the writer’s creation and publication. The novel *Ragtime* was created in the 1970s when the society has entered the post-industrial period, nearly a hundred years after the Progressive Era. If the post-industrial society is characterized by creating a “surreal” world through visual reality and simulated images, literary creation based on historical facts is a resistance against the illusory world. In the post-industrial society the world changed with an amazing speed and relentless reconstruction made an existing building immediately turn into historical relics, so if one wants to truly understand a city one has to “remember a vanished city” (Katz, 2010, p. 810). Historical narration does not mean fully objective representation of facts for it is inevitably influenced by the narrator’s emotion, evaluation and imagination. Memory bears a similarity with history in that it is also subjective, loaded with the writer’s emotion and thoughts toward a certain place. Memory is not only related to the past events or experiences, but also “an interpretation of the present” (Assmann, 2016, p. 85). Globalization is an important feature of the post-industrial society, and in the trend of homogenization globally, ethnical cultures are in the peril of being weakened or even eliminated, so the reconstruction of Jewish people and their living areas shows the writer’s introspection and critique on homogenization.

Conclusion

In the novel *Ragtime* Doctorow reconstructs American cities, especially New York City, during the transitional Progressive Era from agricultural society to industrial society, uncovering the features of urban space in that period. The distribution and possession of urban spaces reflect the complicated relation between different social strata, deeply stamped with the brand of power and capital. Urban spaces are always under a constant process of moving and extending along with the progress of time. The reconstruction of urban spaces in the Progressive Era shows the acuteness of social conflicts and a deep crisis of capitalism, demonstrating the conflicts between the traditional and the modern, depicting human hardships and opportunities, presenting the spaces in the writer’s mind and showing his concern and sympathy for the weak and the vulnerable groups. Doctorow’s imaginary reconstruction of the living areas of the Jews makes readers realize the hardships of the Jews when they first arrived in America, and their contribution for the progress of the country should not be ignored. However the writer doesn’t fix his eyes only on the Jews, for he extends to show profound concern for the oppressed of other nationalities, which was his transcendence.

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