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Governing Cities in a Global Era: Urban Innovation, Competition, and Democratic Reform

Robin Hambleton and Jill Simone Gross (eds.); New York; Palgrave Macmillan; 2007; xxii + 267 pages; £19.99; ISBN: 02-306023-04

Questions such as these – what are the implications of globalisation for urban government and governance? how are cities responding to these unprecedented economic, social, environmental and political changes? what are the implications for those who must lead and manage increasingly complex multicultural cities and city regions? (p.10) – that have perturbed students of contemporary global urbs are the focus of the 16 articles that form *Governing Cities in a Global Era*. These articles are, to a large extent, a selection of the 160 papers presented at the City Futures International Conference organized by the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois, Chicago in July 2004. Distilling common themes from such a large and disparate group of research papers is always a challenge. The editors of this book must be complemented for having so seamlessly and adroitly integrated the articles into three thematic sections that can reveal the challenges globalisation and urbanisation pose for social and economic change in the twenty-first century.

The three sections in the book correspond to the levels at which cities around the world are engaging with globalisation. The chapters in the first section are concerned with the impact of macro-trends of economics and politics on cities. A predominant expectation with the chapters in this section is to reveal whether predictable trends or generalisable results can be garnered from analyzing cities (and especially their governing paradigms). These chapters engage directly with two of the more compelling myths of globalisation. First, cities around the world are on a path of convergence as they increasingly respond in similar ways to the challenges thrown up. Second, these responses reveal the declining relevance of the nation-state (p.16). Using different theoretical, empirical and methodological approaches, the first four chapters unequivocally puncture the myth about a convergence in urban governance around the world. The particularities of the local and national, the authors would agree, continue to play a defining role in the global responses of cities. The significant contribution this book makes is in identifying the diverse methodological approaches ranging from an in-depth single case study to historical comparisons to qualitative document analysis that students of urban processes can utilize in interrogating urbanisation.

The chapters in the second section bring the spotlight onto specific cities around the world and at the intermediate level of transformations in the institutions of urban governments in these cities. Globalisation and the enhanced interconnectivity in social and economic domains throw up different challenges for cities around the world. While for wealthier cities increased immigration and demands for enhanced inclusiveness can be testing, for other cities the proliferation of an entrenched criminal informality in the form of drugs and arms flows present unique challenges for public governance. In yet other cities booming economic development manifests in changes in the structure of local governance that have facilitated decentralization, while in others the loosening bonds of authoritarian nation-state structures have promoted divergent responses in the vibrancy of local democracy. This section is particularly fascinating because the disparate narratives of cities around the world highlight at least three theoretically significant points about the nature of urban change in globalising times. First, it highlights that growing urban inequalities in power, access, and resources are perceived universally as a threat to the legitimacy of local governments. But the innovative responses that city governments have instituted to counter this legitimacy deficit remain rooted in local histories of society, culture and

politics. A second point is that these innovative responses of city governments are attempting to engage more creatively with their rapidly transforming societies in governing. In doing so they project the relational concept of governance that is widely acknowledged as a vehicle for neoliberal reforms. The final significant point concerns the scope of these novel governance ventures. Here the book makes the important point that focusing on the goal oriented concept of 'governing is desirable as it can blend together an interest in using the legitimate hierarchical power of the state (i.e. government) with an inclusive approach to partnership building (i.e. governance)' (p.218). By presenting the concept of governing, the book circumvents the sterility of the debate between government and governance that exists in the literature. In doing so this book makes a seminal contribution to the burgeoning literature on urban governance.

The chapters in the third and final substantial section of the book bring their focus to bear on the microlevel of individual actions taken to foster governing in contemporary cities. Keeping in mind the goal of enhanced and inclusive democratic participation in civic decision making, the authors in this section outline different strategies available to urban leaders, public managers and community activists. The actions of urban leaders, their social interaction, and their social skills, are aspects that have too often found little space within the larger literature on contemporary urban governance. By rectifying this longstanding lacuna, this book seeks to highlight the critical role that strategic leadership and individual characteristics play in initiating progressive urban change.

The articles in the book do an excellent job of reviewing and connecting existing literature. Individual references from the articles have been consolidated into a comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book. This voluminous reference list will be valuable to all students and practitioners of contemporary urban change. Practice oriented fields such as urban management, urban planning and development as well as academic fields such as urban studies, urban geography and politics stand to benefit from this work. However, given the advanced level of analysis and the conceptual engagement with the literature, it is only advanced students at the postgraduate level or academic professionals who will be able to better appreciate this book's stellar contribution to scholarship.