Democratizing urban development: Community organizations for housing across the United States and Brazil

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BOOK REVIEW

Democratizing urban development: Community organizations for housing across the United States and Brazil, by Maureen M. Donaghy, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2018

Democratizing Urban Development is a valuable contribution to the growing field of comparative urban politics (Post, 2018). In the study, Maureen M. Donaghy compares housing policies in cities in the United States (Atlanta and Washington, DC) with Brazil (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo). This highly original comparison exposes how cities with very different political, economic, and social histories face similar obstacles to providing accessible affordable housing to their residents. Donaghy correctly points out that large cities around the world face the challenges of gentrification and displacement and suggests that the political conditions underlying neighborhood change require further analysis. She is right: the lack of affordable housing in cities is a global and universal political challenge.

Donaghy’s study provides a template for how comparative politics research can use innovative research designs to compare Global South countries to the United States. By nesting subnational comparisons within a national-level comparative framework, Donaghy demonstrates how decisions affecting urban development are made at multiple levels of politics. In particular, she zooms in on the locus of civil society engagement and explains how residents and organizations working at the community level are crucial for inclusive governance.

Theoretically, Donaghy opens new ground in explaining how civil society organizations push for a voice in making decisions about housing, redevelopment, and security in cities. Importantly, she coins the phrase “democratizing urban development,” which reflects her desire for a process of governing that involves enhancing the capacity and commitment of community organizations to participate in governance institutions. This fits nicely within an emerging literature on community development corporations or “resident-organized and social entrepreneurial activities [that] are increasingly seen as solutions for deficiencies in public services and neighborhood regeneration efforts” (Varady, Kleinhans, & Maarten, 2015, p. 254). Donaghy advances this literature by drawing attention to two important factors that explain the strategies that civil society organizations use to achieve inclusive urban development: the organization’s ideology and its relationship to the state. These two variables go a long way toward explaining why and when organizations use what she terms inclusionary, indirect, overhaul, and exit strategies. By drawing from—and adding to—Albert Hirschman’s (1970) influential theory of “exit, voice, loyalty,” she appropriately moves beyond dominant social movement theories that reduce organizational decision making to contentious versus cooperative tactics.

The strength of the book rests on Donaghy’s detailed and well-researched case studies of the four cities. She documents how resident-based organizations in the informal settlement Villa Autódromo in Rio de Janeiro resisted eviction when the government was building the Olympic Park. The organization first tried to negotiate with the state through the democratic institution Defensoria Pública but shifted toward an “exit” strategy when they did not achieve success. They used the international media and made connections with university professors and nongovernmentals to publicize their cause, which led to short-term remedies for the residents. The case demonstrates the different “decision points” throughout the political process that enabled and constrained organizational strategies but in the end undermined transformational change.

In Atlanta, the push for affordable housing by the Historic District Development Corporation, a community development corporation in the historic Old Fourth Ward, led to the creation of a trust for affordable housing, as well as an inclusionary zoning ordinance. These modest but still significant achievements can be explained by the conservative ideology of the organization, its inability to mobilize support, and the influence of real estate developers on government. One organizer suggests
that this lack of popular mobilization is just the way politics operates in Atlanta, “Rather than raising hell, we talk and negotiate” (p. 113). These strategies helped revitalize the neighborhood but also contributed to rapidly rising property prices.

São Paulo serves as an example of the optimal outcome in that social movements were able to generate new programs and policies, including funding to renovate existing buildings, which in turn helped to minimize displacement of the urban poor. Organizations relied on a radical ideology that claimed a right to the city, with close connections to the state, in order to change laws to favor poor urban residents. Most interesting, the movements used jornadas, or conferences where government officials, activists, and concerned citizens met to discuss current challenges and solutions. In this way, the case study demonstrates how organizations can use protests and participatory institutions like conferences to make desired changes. This is similar to tactics used by the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, which combine legal challenges with protest activity to force the government to respond to the needs of the poor.

The case of Washington, DC, emphasizes the importance of local politics and shows how urban development brought improved services and rising property values but also created an affordability crisis for poorer residents. In this case, local governance is accessible to residents and organizations successfully used public testimonies at city council hearings to fight against displacement and removal, as well as secure a trust fund for affordable housing. But as is the case in all four cases, there was no revolutionary transformation: there was very little change in the broader structural factors contributing to rapidly rising housing prices.

Democratizing Urban Development provides important insights into the collective action capacity of urban neighborhoods and organizations. In Rio de Janeiro, a strong leader and group unity contributed to vibrant collective action, whereas there was little collective engagement in Atlanta. A common identity emerged in São Paulo that spurred significant resident participation, which led to funding for housing conservation, which in turn countered evictions. Civic engagement was restricted to maintaining the status quo in Washington, DC. These insights point to the importance of civic life, social capital, and homegrown community leaders in urban governance.

Donaghy could have done more to explain the underlying political and social dynamics in the case study neighborhoods. By focusing on the organizations largely divorced from the social structure of the neighborhoods, the study pays too little attention to the historical development of the cities and, important, the patterns of sorting and segregation that contributed to variation in important neighborhood differences, including social capital, ethnic diversity, and income. This is important because social capital has been shown to be a strong predictor of collective action at the neighborhood level. The book could have done more to explain why certain communities have strong leaders, have unified social structures, or lack vibrant civic cultures.

The book would have benefited from a closer examination of race. All four of these cities have legacies of racial segregation and racist public policies, and racial resentment. Though it is clear that Donaghy understands the importance of race and briefly discusses it in the cases of Atlanta and Washington, DC, a more thorough discussion of how it affects urban development would have strengthened the study. (For a good discussion of the role of race and urban development in the U.S. context, see Brahinsky, 2011.) More interviews and discussions with neighborhood residents themselves, in addition to the activists and scholars who are included in the study, would have provided important insights into the role that race plays in housing access and development in these cities. Though race operates differently in Brazil and the United States, Anthony Marx (1998) demonstrates how state power and racial categorization have interacted historically at the national level to create salient identities and political cleavages. A comparative historical lens of this sort, even of a scaled-back version, would have provided insights into the social context of these four cities.

Democratizing Urban Development opens up new theoretical space for the study of comparative urban development. By comparing cities and countries that are not typically examined together, Donaghy provides original insights into the role that community organizations play in the functioning of their cities. The next step is to test Donaghy’s theory in cities in Africa, Asia, and Europe.
Democratizing Urban Development brings us one step closer to a general theory of comparative urban politics that can explain how community organizations can promote the right to decent and affordable housing around the world.

References

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