

Jonathan S. Davies, *Between Realism and Revolt: Governing Cities in the Crisis of Neoliberal Globalism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781529210910 (cloth); ISBN: 9781529210927 (paper); ISBN: 9781529210941 (ebook)

Jonathan Davies developed *Between Realism and Revolt* from an ESRC project called “Collaborative Governance under Austerity”, which began in 2015. It compares how collaboration contributes to austerity governance across eight different cities in the global North. Initially, the international project aimed to “consider the fate of collaborative governance in the age of austerity” and “the promise of the ‘collaborative moment’ for ushering in an era of inclusionary and consensual governance” (p.185). Ultimately it exposed attempts to embed collaboration as a hegemonic principle of roll-out neoliberalism, framing “the renewal of brute poverty and outright crises of subsistence” as the price we paid for the age of austerity (p.187). Davies introduces the case studies, situating the reader in the post-2008 context of “rising public need and demand, juxtaposed with diminishing or flat-lining resources” (p.11). The introduction sets the premise for the book’s Gramscian theoretical framework: “the old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci 1971). The following chapters explore these symptoms using concrete examples to demonstrate neoliberalism’s retreat towards dominant and coercive forms of governing through mechanisms like rollback and rescaling. Davies makes excellent use of the case studies in Athens, Baltimore, Barcelona, Dublin, Greater Dandenong (Melbourne), Leicester, Montréal and Nantes to show that different forms of governance in the age of austerity produced multiple forms of austere neoliberalism.

The book blends empirical data and Marxian analysis to address some fundamental theoretical debates in Urban Studies. It examines the “collaborative moment”, unpacks the cooperative (or uncooperative) ways state and non-state actors interact on the ground, and questions hegemonic governance strategies peddling entrepreneurialism. Such strategies are unfortunately still being adhered to by local councils and municipalities in 2021. In this sense, the book is way ahead of mainstream political policy and highly recommended to policymakers who continue to base their ideas around falsified claims of collaboration. Rooted in its eight case studies, *Between Realism and*

Revolt skillfully employs concrete empirical evidence to bolster the conjunctural claim, shared by many urban theorists, that neoliberal globalism has been in a rolling crisis for the past two decades.

By clearly setting out the Gramscian theory in the introduction, Davies sets up the case studies and a “productive tension between power-centric and resistance-centric accounts” (p.24). The first chapter situates the 1999 Battle of Seattle as the starting point. Davies presents this pre-millennial moment as the beginning of neoliberal capitalism entrenched by urban governance but punctuated by global counter-hegemonic movements. As well as nodding to the social movements behind mass urban protests of the past two decades, including early counter-globalisation, Indigenous uprisings like the Zapatistas, antiracism, feminism, and environmentalism, the book also traces neoliberalism’s Latin American lineage to the Structural Adjustment Programs dreamt up by the Chicago School and implemented by the IMF during the 1980s and 1990s. *Between Realism and Revolt*’s middle section draws together the extensive collaborative research project’s conclusions to form the book’s backbone. Davies successfully amalgamates theory and empirics for readers in a palatable way, and sets up the case studies by reminding us that cities are always “strategic targets and proving grounds for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy experiments, institutional innovations, and political projects” (Peck et al. 2009: 65). Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how the urban experience was highly uneven, with a significant difference in the meaning of collaboration between the state, market and civil society during the age of austerity. In Athens, Baltimore, Dublin and Leicester in particular, regime consolidation intensified austere neoliberalism. In Dublin, a centralised, authoritarian and revanchist austerity regime disciplined and re-purposed “the more quarrelsome elements of Dublin’s voluntary and community sectors” through a weak local state (p.104). The book also reveals the “rising alienation and anger within a newly rebellious civil society” and grassroots anti-austerity activists who took on the weak local state and challenged austerity’s hegemonic grip (p.105). It shows how neoliberalism has been consolidated, weakened, and transformed by urban governance regimes through the age of austerity, as in the case of Barcelona.

Chapter 7 explores how weak counter-hegemony can serve as a stabilising factor in sustaining austere neoliberalism, preventing us from moving beyond the moment of contention. Davies presents both the potential of counter-hegemonic resistance in Barcelona and the challenges

faced by international municipalism. However, Chapter 8 progresses into a more hopeful moment of disorder and crises of neoliberalism. This chapter, based on research in Greater Dandenong in Victoria, Australia, recounts the state-led intercultural revitalisation regime that managed to produce a fairly organic multi-stakeholder, multi-scalar politics “imbued with the spirit of the collaborative moment”(p.126). By Chapter 8, the reader is firmly situated at the current conjuncture, leading readers to the Afterword, written mid-pandemic. Davies describes his method as a “transversal analysis”, taking us across urban space through time to establish a conjunctural perspective that exposes neoliberalism’s pathological character.

A significant contribution is how the book traverses local and global scales in offering a combination of Gramscian theoretical insights and empirical evidence. *Between Realism and Revolt* is a must for those seeking an up-to-date account of neoliberalism’s trajectory. The book serves to highlight the importance of Urban Studies scholarship in the current conjuncture. Davies reminds us that cities like Barcelona are already doing things differently and therefore exist as possible templates for other places. This book draws together the loose threads of counter-neoliberal struggles of the past two decades whilst remaining true to the methodological approach by using case studies and empirical data. In the later chapters, the book takes the reader into a more imaginative realm that gives space for Davies to speculate about the future of the global economic system. As the book was being finished, Covid-19 took hold, highlighting the velocity of politics and emergence of radicality in our times (May 2017). At the end of the book, Davies evidences this, noting forms of counter-hegemonic internationalism demonstrated by BlackLivesMatter that actively reclaim the revanchist city. Thus, the book “is likely to be a prequel to what lies ahead for cities, in an even more intense form than before” (p.208).

In the Afterword, Davies excuses the terms “contagious” and “socio-spatial distancing”, given their new and upsetting connotations. However, perhaps radical urban theorists instinctively detected, pre-pandemic, neoliberalism’s imminent viral tendency. Indeed, Covid-19 will herald more “morbid symptoms” but will possibly augment internationalism. If nothing else, lockdown honed our ability to work remotely, improving the feasibility of carrying out the kind of international comparative studies that form the basis of this book. We await the next book, which is due to be released at the beginning of 2022.

References

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