

Marc Doussard and Greg Schrock, *Justice at Work: The Rise of Economic and Racial Justice Coalitions in Cities*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781517913052 (paper); ISBN: 9781517913045 (cloth); ISBN: 9781452967561 (ebook)

In April 2020, Philadelphia (where I live) implemented a Fair Workweek law, providing retail and fast-food workers a guarantee of predictable scheduling, mandatory nine-hour rest periods between shifts, and additional pay if employees' schedules are suddenly changed (Reyes 2021). Around the same time, Philly passed a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights that provides labor protections (including paid time off) to house cleaners, nannies, and other workers. I noted with pride the progress the city was making in this area, noticing that advocacy organizations like the National Domestic Workers Alliance and One Pennsylvania were collaborating with progressive city councilmembers, whose number and power had been increasing over the last several years. With the publication of Marc Doussard and Greg Schrock's *Justice at Work: The Rise of Economic and Racial Justice Coalitions in Cities*, I now have a deeper understanding of the organizing and policy entrepreneurship that undergirds these efforts in cities across the United States. Given the American political climate in 2024 and beyond, I worry about the viability and durability of achievements like these. By paying attention to Doussard and Schrock's analysis of these processes, it is my hope that organizers, advocates, and workers can continue to advance justice in a polarized and worrying era.

Doussard and Schrock rely on two key frameworks throughout the book: economic and racial justice (ERJ) coalitions, and urban policy entrepreneurs. ERJ coalitions emerged in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the shortcomings of prior organizing around community benefits agreements and living wage laws. These coalitions consist of networks of "activists who contest economic and racial inequalities at the same time" (p.59). ERJ coalitions frame their activism around explicit critiques of institutional and structural racism (p.54), rather than relegating race to the background. They organize citywide networks and connect with national movement organizations to press for policy change.

Urban policy entrepreneurs (UPEs) are defined by Doussard and Schrock as "activists who work through coalitions to shop for political venues with favorable bargaining terms, and

who experiment systematically with both legislation and techniques to win support for their projects” (p.64). UPEs connect with members of economic and racial justice coalitions in their work as activists, academics, and policymakers—allowing local struggles to connect to national movements. Some of the wins achieved by UPEs in solidarity with ERJ coalitions include campaigns to raise the minimum wage, targeted hiring programs for disadvantaged populations, paid time off and fair workweek (as in Philadelphia), and pushback against fiscal austerity and financialization as racist practices.

The book proceeds as follows: Chapter 1 critiques simplistic narratives about the triumph of the city, exploring the possibilities to turn those narratives into discourse that supports redistribution and justice. Chapter 2 explores ERJ coalitions, while Chapter 3 defines UPEs. Chapters 4 through 7 go deeper on organizing efforts in the domains mentioned above (minimum wage, etc.). Doussard and Schrock covered a significant amount of ground to gather stories and data on movements for just working conditions. Their efforts spanned 14 years, including more than 270 interviews, participant observation, and collaboration with community and labor organizations in multiple US cities. The authors use direct quotes from organizers sparingly; when these quotes appear, they are poignant and illuminating. More voices from participants would have added to the urgency and immediacy of the narrative.

Speaking of narrative, one of the book’s contributions is its emphasis on discourse and framing to amplify issues of concern to movements, political actors, and impacted communities. Taking their cue from Frank Fischer’s policy scholarship, Doussard and Schrock note that activists are successfully shifting a public conversation that has previously been dominated by narrow, economic concerns. In response, ERJ coalitions are naming names, calling out bad actors, and centering issues of racial oppression, winning hearts and minds through strategic use of impactful slogans and tropes (“we are the 99%”), rather than trying to cultivate citizen outrage about the technical minutiae of mortgage-backed securities and financialization.

The power of narrative to shape reality calls back to the work of 20th century literary theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin and Tzvetan Todorov, who assert that words point in two directions, facing both authors and their audiences. Narrative is therefore a collective act (Zitcer 2017). Given the dialogic nature of language, there is considerable room to further explore the

consequences for both organizers and communities, testing the power and the limits of narrative to effect change in practice.

The authors and the coalitions they track are not limiting themselves to narrative innovation. The authors foreground practical questions about “how resistance works and how it can expand” (p.75). One striking aspect to this emphasis on practicality is the relative lack of an overall critique of capitalism in *Justice at Work*. Doussard and Schrock engage Cedric Robinson and others’ work on racial capitalism as a guiding principle of ERJ coalitions but note that activists do not use this language. Nor do they eschew economic growth as a goal, noting that activists’ “policy agendas do not fundamentally threaten the imperative of urban economic growth; rather, they seek to bend growth toward more distributively just outcomes” (p.38). Economic growth can be increased through distributive fairness. In a climate when de-growth discourse is gaining prominence, and capitalism is being questioned by young people throughout America (Pew Research Center 2022), it may be useful to ask fundamental questions about our political and economic arrangements. Or maybe it isn’t the right strategy—achieving tangible policy wins for workers depends on messages that can achieve widespread agreement.

A possible practical alternative to centering economic gains and GDP to determine the success of a nation or community can be found in Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to human development (Nussbaum 2011; Sen 1990). Doussard and Schrock note that this framework has potential to connect direct action and policy entrepreneurship with a bigger picture framing of rights and, indeed, justice. Sen and Nussbaum’s theoretical work has even been put into practical use by the United Nations in the form of a Human Development Index. There is room for more engagement with this framework as a tool to organize policy goals.

The capabilities approach has clear implications for a theory of justice (Robeyns 2020), and scholarship, grounded in actually existing struggles, can help in the project of making justice manifest. But what do Doussard and Schrock mean when they talk about justice? They do not attempt to offer an *a priori* definition from a distanced position. They rely on the emergent definitions of practitioners. The authors acknowledge that the pursuit of justice (environmental, economic, racial) is forever in process, incomplete and “necessarily utopian” (p.193).

Nevertheless, the goals of ERJ coalitions paint at least a partial picture of achievable outcomes: quality work, with living wages, support for care work alongside other paid work, and stronger provision of public goods.

All of this leads to the question of the viability of ERJ coalitions and urban policy entrepreneurs in the context of political polarization and disturbing trends in American politics. Doussard and Schrock warn that state preemption of local laws can threaten progressive policy gains. Policy entrepreneurship on the political right has been extremely successful; they note the power of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to draft legislation rolling back the gains sought by ERJ coalitions. Doussard and Schrock remain hopeful that local politics in cities and some states will allow for legislative pushback (bolstered by advocacy and direct action) to counteract preemption. To the authors, experimentation and repetition are the path to eventual, durable policy wins.

Justice at Work will be useful for students of urban social and political movements, community organizing, economic development, planning and public policy. It is clearly written, brings together examples from multiple cities and campaigns, and asks big questions without getting bogged down in theorizing. I would have liked to learn more about the mechanics of policy transfer and policy mobility. How exactly do UPEs utilize national networks to touch down in local jurisdictions and get policies passed that have worked in other places? And, as I said before, I am always eager to hear more voices from the field through direct testimony of their experience. But these are minor quibbles in a book that has taught me much about the horizons and limitations for making my own city of Philadelphia a more just place for the people whose work helps it to thrive.

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