

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Hamel, Pierre and Roger Keil (eds).**

*Suburban Governance: A Global View.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

384 pages.

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As their book-title implies, the editors of this volume of collected essays are exceptionally ambitious. Part of the “Global Suburbanisms” project at York University headed by Roger Keil, the volume aims at worldwide coverage of the suburban phenomenon. With the exception of the Middle East and North Africa, global coverage is admirable, even if the corollary is that some of the world’s largest and most important cities get short shrift: New York, Mexico City, and Tokyo each have only one brief entry in the book’s comprehensive index.

Apart from the short Introduction and Conclusion by the editors, most of the book’s sixteen chapters are territorially-based (the U.S, Canada, Australia, Western Europe, Global South etc). But three of the most interesting are mostly outside this territorial framework. My colleague at the University of Western Ontario, Robert Young, in the shortest chapter in the book, urges the contributors to focus on the “intervening variables” between large global forces and actual political decisions or non-decisions. Jamie Peck focuses on the connections between suburbia and libertarianism in the U.S., but ends his fascinating account by introducing readers to the ultimate libertarian (suburban?) escape: “seasteading” on ocean-going platforms. Thomas Sieverts examines aesthetic issues in suburban landscapes. Ananya Roy reflects on whether we can reconceptualize suburbs in the Global North by understanding postcolonial suburbs in the Global South.

Given the book’s wide-ranging scope, some obvious questions arise, the most important of which is: What exactly is “suburban governance”? The answer is far from obvious. According to the three authors of Chapter 1, “suburban” refers to “the combination of non-central population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion.” It includes “the wealthy gated communities of southern California to the high-rise dominated old suburbs of Europe and Canada, the faux Westernized outskirts of Indian and Chinese cities, and the slums and squatter settlements in Africa and Latin America” (p.22). “Governance” in the suburban context is even broader in its scope. Although discussed in various ways at different points in Chapter 1, the statement I found most helpful was that governance refers “to the constellation of public and private processes, actors and institutions that determine and shape the planning, design, politics, and economics of suburban ways of life” (p.19).

Given the nature of the definitions, it is hardly surprising that the volume contains very little about what suburban governments (i.e. municipalities) actually do or don’t do. This statement applies even to the chapter on the United States where there are more suburban governments than anywhere else and where their importance has been well documented by political scientists such as Juliet Gainsborough and J. Eric Oliver, whose work is not mentioned. What is much more surprising, for a book with a self described

“political-economy perspective” (p.4) is that there is so little about the economics of suburban development. Pamela Blais’ book on *Perverse Cities* is cited (p.22) but there is nothing in the whole volume about how governments tax suburban land, or about how infrastructure pricing policies affect the nature of suburban development or the affordability of suburban housing. The chapter on Canada says very little (pp.95-6) about the role of development companies in building and financing suburban public infrastructure or how they pass on these costs to suburban homebuyers. Readers learn even less about infrastructure financing in other parts of the world. There is much discussion about the role of global capital in suburban development but not so much about how it operates through different mechanisms in different countries. Presumably, local lawyers, consultants, fixers, and politicians act as intermediaries, but few details are provided, except partially for India (pp.292-4).

As the concluding chapter by the editors demonstrates, it is almost impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions from this eclectic set of essays. The editors claim that the essays demonstrated that the three modalities of suburban governance introduced in the first chapter—state-led, accumulation of capital, and authoritarian and private—are present, to varying degrees in each of the regional cases studied” (p.353). Chinese suburbanization is singled out as being led by “local state entrepreneurialism” combined with “one of the fiercest forms of capital accumulation and...some of the most authoritative forms of privatism on the planet” (p.353). More general conclusions remain elusive. Nevertheless, many of the book’s essays offer rewarding and provocative overviews of suburban development in particular countries and regions and deserve to be read by anyone interested in the diverse ways in which suburbanization is changing our world.

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