


BOOK REVIEW

Neoliberal Urban Governance: Spaces, Culture and Discourses in Buenos Aires and Chicago

By Carolina Sternberg. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023; 208 pp., \$ 139.99 (Cloth)

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Keywords: Urban governance; Gentrification; Comparative urbanism; Global South

In recent years, urban scholars are increasingly scrutinizing how neoliberal urban policies intersect with diverse economic realities, institutional frameworks, political and racial dynamics in cities worldwide (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck et al., 2013). They highlight the importance of comparing the different ways neoliberalism unfolds across regions, notably in less-explored contexts of rapid urbanization such as the Global South (Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2016). In her book, “Neoliberal Urban Governance,” Carolina Sternberg addresses this gap by examining the local manifestations of neoliberal policies in two contrasting metropolises: Chicago and Buenos Aires. Since 2011, both cities have been managed by local administrations overtly championing neoliberal agendas, marked by a commitment to growth-oriented urban development. In this context, the author illustrates how governance actors utilized a variety of “locally constituted and humanly crafted rhetoric, programs, and policies” (p. 5) to transform disinvested areas into consumption hubs triggering a series of detrimental effects experienced by local communities, such as exacerbated segregation, heightened inequalities, and displacement. The book’s major contribution is Sternberg’s thorough exploration of the discourses, metaphors, and shared understandings deployed by governance actors to rationalize the socio-spatial transformations driven by neoliberal ideals. The author unveils the multifaceted nature of neoliberal urban governance, illustrating its reach beyond mere economic transactions. Sternberg asserts that “neoliberal governance mobilizes old and new racial and class identities within new redevelopment initiatives,” suggesting that neoliberalism operates through a blend of overt and covert means, deeply intertwined with racial dynamics (p. 14).

The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, the author introduces key theoretical concepts essential to neoliberal urban governance, such as cultural economy, gentrification-led redevelopment, displacement, and post-political narratives. The second part delves into the empirical findings, examining three centrally

located disadvantaged neighborhoods of Buenos Aires: San Telmo, La Boca, and Villa 31. In San Telmo and La Boca, governance actors initiated the “Arts District” initiative, leveraging the neighborhoods’ historical and cultural heritage to challenge stereotypes and foster a new identity as a “cultural, touristic, and versatile space” (p. 57). Despite the narrative surrounding this policy, it fell short of expectations, resulting in forcible evictions and reduced affordable housing (p. 60). Turning to Villa 31, urbanization efforts became a priority for governance actors. The slum, long stigmatized as an “eyesore” by local elites, is mainly inhabited by residents facing historic marginalization, often labeled as “villeros” and depicted as land usurpers and outsiders. This perception is exacerbated by the neighborhoods’ predominantly migrant population coming from Andean countries, contrasting with Argentina’s emphasis on white European heritage (p. 72). Governance actors here involved significant international investment and public resource allocation to align Villa 31’s socio-economic dynamics with those of the broader city. This included a narrative shift, renaming the area “Barrio 31” and repositioning its marginalized residents as integrated “vecinos”. The rebranding served to transform Villa 31 into a “formalized, liveable, and robust space” (p. 71). However, the newly labelled “vecinos” often faced inadequate relocations, indicating that for governance actors, the welfare of long-term residents was an afterthought, while the primary aim was to attract more affluent outsiders for cultural consumption and economic growth.

The second part explores the transformations of Chicago’s Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods, traditionally home to Latinx communities enduring decades of stigmatization, violence, and overall public and private neglect. Once considered main industrial hubs, these areas now face post-industrial challenges such as disinvestment in public infrastructure, unemployment, and high crime rates. Here, governance actors stirred “more anxiety than enthusiasm” (p. 112), leading to policies aimed at positioning the city internationally and prevent economic decline. A significant difference from Buenos Aires is the reduced support governance actors received from federal funding, leading to a greater dependence on public–private partnerships and the redirection of city taxes to subsidize redevelopment projects (p.110). Initiatives such as the creation of high-end commercial spaces and luxurious residential areas in vacant properties were justified by the need to establish “prosperous and orderly ethnic spaces,” implying that these areas would serve as opportunities for “increasing tax revenues for the city, and better positioning Chicago on a global scale” (p.189). In the end, much like in Buenos Aires, Chicagoans encountered challenges such as a decrease in affordable housing, the erosion of cultural roots, and heightened racial segregation.

The concluding section provides a dialogical analysis of the agendas, strategies, and rationales utilized by mayoral administrations in both cities to tackle issues of inequality and development. It illustrates how these approaches are adapted to specific political-economic contexts, shedding light on the nuanced differences in rhetoric between the two cities. Particularly noteworthy is the transition from previously endorsed coercive and authoritative strategies—such as policing in Chicago and eradication in Buenos Aires—toward a post-political “socially-minded” seemingly neutral discourse, focused on values such as sustainability and inclusion in the former, and integration and liveability in the latter (p. 192). Sternberg argues that this discourse suppresses political discussions on urban inequalities, without necessarily

addressing the needs of the local communities in terms of job quality, reducing stigma, or enhancing affordable and high-quality housing.

While the book adeptly contrasts how neoliberal projects adapt to diverse landscapes between the Global North and Global South, it overlooks a critical examination of gentrification and displacement, central aspects of this process. For example, Sternberg highlights gentrification as a central expression of neoliberal urban governance globally, citing displacement as “one of the most violent and dehumanizing consequences” (p. 10). However, the book only briefly mentions the voices of the displaced without delving into their perceptions of changes, such as the resignification of public spaces and the erasure of certain identities. Additionally, while it touches upon resistance efforts, it lacks an in-depth assessment of the narratives and strategies used to challenge neoliberal rationales. Despite these concerns, the book provides rich empirical context and explores the intersection of race and ethnicity in neoliberal urban restructuring. These critiques open avenues for further research on the emotional experiences of displaced individuals within neoliberal urban governance, offering insights beyond traditional socioeconomic indicators.

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doi:10.1017/rep.2024.20