

Local and Global: Management of Cities in the Information Age

Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells.

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This “urban manifesto” was based on a report prepared for the Istanbul Habitat Conference of June 1996. In some ways this book should be treated as the fourth volume of Castells’ critically acclaimed trilogy: *The Rise Of The Network Society* (1996), *The Power Of Identity* (1997), and *The End Of The Millennium* (1998). The strength of this book lies in the authors’ attempt to make Castells’ theoretical and empirical works more practical, and it is on these terms that we should evaluate the book. More than half of this book is dedicated to comparative urban policy to illustrate the issues many cities are facing.

Chapters 1-4 form the theoretical foundation of the book, showing that this is no futurist account of a new world order. In chapters 1 and 2 we read about *Globalization, Informationalization and Management of Cities* and *The Impact of Globalization on the Spatial and Social Structure of Cities*. By setting these against chapters 3 and 4 (*The City of Women* and *The Multicultural City*), the authors boldly signify their dialectical account of the glory of globalization through the information revolution and the dark side of this process as represented in the social exclusion of women, children, and certain ethnicities.

This approach reflects the ongoing frustrations of social scientists to really explain the creative and destructive process of globalization. In this sense Castells’ most recent contribution has its origins in his earlier attempts to explain dynamics in capitalist development beyond sectoral terms, as in *The Urban Question* (1977). At the same time he tries to theorize capitalist development to discover the core logic of the new global economy instead of treating capitalist development as a static set of structural constraints as in *The City and the Grassroots* (1983). In this way his recent work fills his previous theoretical gap of understanding social movements which are not class-based. Perhaps these have nothing to do with class consciousness after all but the nature of capitalist development itself.

The point of departure from theoretical to practical discussion in the book comes when the authors discuss the spatial dimensions of the processes of globalization and informationalization. This is framed as

the domination of “the space of flows” over “the space of places”. The space of flows is structured in electronic circuits that link together strategic nodes of production and management across the globe. The space of place is the territorial form of organization of everyday living and the form experienced by the great majority of human beings. “Yet while flow of space is globally integrated, the place space is locally fragmented” (44). Cities then become both the terrain of struggles and the administrative unit in the midst of the new global economic space.

Central to the new feudalism turn of “bringing the city back in” is cities’ competitiveness in the new global economy. The role of the city in economic development presents a new challenge among the other previous conventional challenges such as service provision. The second half of the book then presents various cases of the way cities around the world cope with these challenges. Policies, plans, projects, and the administrative challenges of city governments have been presented in a World Bank style of world-wide snap shot and boxes-texts-bullets layout.

In order to be competitive in the global economy and to guarantee their populations the minimum levels of well-being necessary to allow the consolidation of peaceful democratic coexistence, many cities develop new strategic plans to become a key node in the new global economy by providing infrastructures that meets the requirements of international capital. This may include both economic development such as transportation facilities (Birmingham), or “cultural” facilities for the growing tourism business (Barcelona and Glasgow), or both.

The strategic plan itself represents the new planning tool in a new planning paradigm that emphasizes people’s participation in shaping the goals, and seeks to achieve its goals via coordination among different players in the city—a.k.a. governance—rather than the bureaucratic master plan.

To achieve the balance of global competitiveness and peaceful democratic coexistence, the authors raise the issue of sustainable development as a central theme of the new planning paradigm. Here sustainable development embraces not only the natural environment, but also social and economic issues as seen in many existing collective consumption programs. For example, public housing policies and provision that can provide the base for economic development through subsidies (Hong Kong) and social integration through ethnic ratios in housing units (Singapore). And to make sure that this policy-based paper will not be picked up only by the city’s technocrats, the authors lay down the principles of local democracy and citizens’ rights in shaping the sense of the city as a collective life.

Having laid out many theoretical conceptions of the process of the new economy and its social exclusion effects, as well as many empirical examples of practical aspects around the world in dealing with these issues, the book lacks an evaluation of many of the policies presented in book. Case studies are mainly presented in the form of summaries of official planning documents. Lack of discussion on evaluation criteria leads to the difficulty of differentiating between the propaganda aspects in the image making of cities around the world, and the impact of these strategic plans and sustainability agenda towards the marginal who have been excluded from this new network economy. Strategic planning and consensus planning are based on the assumption that every player in the city has been equally organized to a certain extent. The book does not provide a mechanism whereby the marginal who are mentioned in chapters 3 and 4 can become part of a strategic planning process. Lacking this crucial element, the book becomes another technical and top-down urban recipe with an advocate's face. Similarly there is a danger that this book will be used in favor of the existing growth-led development urban strategies, given the fact that in many part of the world, cities' political structures and administrations are still very centralized and undemocratic.

To fill the gaps in this practice-oriented book, perhaps it would be a good idea to go back and re-read Castells' *The City and the Grassroots* (1983). This might balance the top down tone of the book with some empirical cases of how the citizen can shape the city through active political struggle.

References

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