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Johannes Novy

Cities for a Small Continent. International Handbook of City Recovery

Anne Power with Bruce Katz, Policy Press, Bristol/Chicago, 2016, 368 pages, ISBN: 978-1447327530, GBP £24.99 (paperback).

‘Cities for a Small Continent’ is an interesting yet strange book. Already its subtitle is somewhat bewildering. The book is mainly concerned with the ‘rise, fall and rebirth’ of seven former industrial strongholds in Western Europe - Belfast and Sheffield in the UK, Lille and Saint-Etienne in France, as well as Bilbao, Leipzig, and Torino – and the lessons their trajectories pre and post the 2008 crisis hold for other European cities that have lost major industries. In addition to the story of these – in the words of the author – ‘phoenix cities’, the book also includes a chapter by Bruce Katz and Alex Jones on the recent resurgence of industrial cities in the US, but its claim to be an ‘International Handbook of City Recovery’ nevertheless comes across as slightly fallacious. This is not to say, however, that the book’s scope is not ambitious – if anything, as I will discuss shortly, the opposite is the case.

Building on a previous study co-authored with Jörg Ploeger, and Astrid Winkler (Power et al., 2010), Anne Power, who teaches and researches at the LSE, presents a sweeping journey across space and time that provides various interesting insights into different aspects of urban development from the industrial revolution to the present day. Power’s emphasis rests on the policy responses to the many phases of growth, decline, and restructuring Europe’s old industrial cities have experienced, including, in particular, the way governments along with private sector and civil society actors confront current global challenges such as climate change and the consequences of the 2008 financial crash and today’s uncertain economic order. Drawing on several rounds of fieldwork in her case study cities, she adopts a ‘local’ perspective to explain the consequences of and reactions to past and present crises. Framed by a foreword by Richard Rogers, who worked with Power on the UK Government’s Urban Task Force, an afterword, as well as an introduction and a conclusion, *Cities for a Small Continent* has eight main chapters. These includes six roughly chronological chapters by Power as well as the already mentioned contribution penned by Katz and Jones which reports upon ‘new shoots of growth’ in US-American industrial cities such as Cleveland, Philadelphia and Detroit. Each of these chapters as well as the introduction include a detailed ‘tale of a city’ (p.17) to set the stage for the topics to be addressed and illustrate main arguments. These ‘ground level stories’ are vividly written and Power’s writing generally is strongest when delving into the particulars and peculiarities of the places she is chiefly concerned with. Many of the latter have received

relatively little attention in the literature and Power deserves credit for gathering and sharing their hitherto often untold or at least under-told stories and bringing them to life with her fluid prose and engaging descriptions.

Yet Power veers deep into other territory too. Among other things, her book purports to

- evaluate the regeneration efforts of her case study cities and analyze ‘what the costs and benefits of different [policy] approaches are’;
- explain ‘what the differences are between cities’ and ‘what common rationale and patterns of change emerge’ (p.12);
- set forth a framework for understanding phoenix cities’ past and present evolution; and
- discuss what she describes as the emergence of a ‘uniquely European model of city recovery’ (p.15) and its prospect as a pathway toward a more ‘viable, more balanced urban future’ (p.20).

This non-exhaustive list of objectives Power seeks to accomplish illustrates her gloriously broad ambitions – ambitions that, unfortunately, are only partially fulfilled. It is a weary truism by now that attempting to achieve too much at once often implies to achieve very little and as much as I admire Power’s desire for comprehensiveness, I cannot help but think that *Cities for a Small Continent* would have benefited from a narrower focus and a more manageable agenda. Its scope - which addresses nearly every urban-related issue of concern along economic, political, social, and ecological dimensions – prevents the author again and again from developing her core points with convincing depth and detail and the book’s conceptual framework remains vague and in many places unclear. In fact, already the choice of case studies raises questions. Among the ‘common characteristics’ Power cites as reasons for the selection of her cases, she stresses the existence of ‘clear signs of resilience and recovery in spite of crisis’ following the 2008 recession (p.7). So far, so good, but the author fails to sufficiently acknowledge that the latter played out in strikingly different ways across Europe. Germany’s economic downturn following the global recession is hardly comparable to the sort of crisis other countries experienced and Leipzig constitutes a particularly strange choice to investigate European cities’ responses to the ‘still-rumbling financial crisis which has cost them jobs, cut public resources, and dented their recent recovery’ (p.178) for the simple reason that the latter can hardly be said of Leipzig. Its export-oriented economy certainly felt the impact of the international economic crisis but it quickly recovered and Leipzig’s image as one of the most dynamic cities in Europe’s most powerful and prosperous economy remained largely unaffected.

Unfortunate is also that Power’s study is compromised by factual errors. The 2009 closure of the German mail order company Quelle, which used to have its largest dispatch center in Leipzig, can for instance hardly be described as an example of the ‘immediate impacts of the

Eurozone crisis and new austerity' (p.143) and Germany's decision to expand the short-term labour market and cut unemployment payments and job protection occurred long before and not, as the author insinuates, during the post-2008 period. Such errors cast doubt on other information presented in the book – especially since it is frequently impossible for the reader to understand how they were arrived at. Power cites her written sources only sporadically (and when she does no page numbers are provided) and does not elaborate upon the, in her words, 'grounded methods' she employed to 'understand the lived experiences of citizens and city leaders' (p.7). Power states that *Cities for a Small Continent* presents a 'people story' (p. 12) but there is no description of the people the author talked to nor does she make much of the fact that processes of urban change are typically subject to multiple, often conflicting interpretations depending on the people observing and experiencing it.

What's more is that Power hardly engages with existing theoretical contributions on different aspects of urban change and governance. Reference to the bourgeoining literature on cross-national urban comparisons could for example have helped to more effectively tackle the complexities involved in researching urban realities across five different countries and more theory generally could have helped to better structure and subsequently analyze many of the topics presented. Good theories, as Gerry Stoker reminds us, 'help us to see the wood for the trees' when trying to make sense of a social phenomenon or event, amongst other things by 'select[ing] out certain factors as the most important or relevant' (Stoker, 1995, p. 16-17). That Power struggled to select, structure, prioritise and effectively present the enormous amount of information she processed is perhaps best illustrated by several of the book's thirty-odd tables whose content often appears to have been thrown together with little regard for coherence. Many of them add little to the work and could be easily deleted to free up space and discuss some of the book's key concerns in greater depth and detail. The latter involves particularly today's status of urban development and governance. Positing that industrial cities' development can be divided into three phases, growth and decline; recovery and new crises; and an alternative 'greener' future, Power argues that 'years of upheaval and austerity [have created] a new and distinctive approach to city reform and recovery – truly transformative innovation' but this is frankly hyperbole not sufficiently supported by evidence or analysis. Many of the characteristics of her 'uniquely European model of city recovery' – an emphasis on high-density, mixed use, recycling, conservation, etc. - are neither altogether new nor are they particularly European and her discussion is often more concerned with policy prescription than empirical observation and fails to convincingly support the assertion that recent changes in the sphere of urban policy have been profound enough to speak of a new model of its focus and functioning. Strangely enough, it seems that the author herself is well aware of this. The book concludes with the remark that 'we need to ask ourselves whether our handbook (...) does offer the promise of a more sustainable future, whether our framework for understanding city recovery in the European context (...) matches the new reality'. These were the kind of questions that I hoped the book would answer when I agreed to review it which, if anything, confirms my

earlier point that *Cities for a Small Continent* is indeed a strange book.

References

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