

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Ed.)** *The Rise of Cities: Montréal, Toronto, Vancouver and Other Cities*. Montréal, QC: Black Rose Books, 2017. 211p. \$19.99 (9781551643342).

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**I**t has been a decade now since the majority of humanity has lived in cities, Dimitrios Roussopoulos states in the introduction to *The Rise of Cities*, and it is only a matter of time before “cities – not nation-States – are the islands of governance on which the future world order rests” (9). It is this vision of the future which makes these essays on Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver, with a coda on Barcelona and Madrid, indispensable reads. *The Rise of Cities* spends most of its time, by means of detailed chronologies, cycling through the patterns of progressive and conservative municipal politics. Interspersed are important snapshots of citizen-led movements trying to influence, infiltrate or dismantle those politics. Important because, as the book outlines, corporate “global cities” exclude the poor and people of colour from municipal decision-making processes through non-coercive and coercive forces alike: “The police in such cities are amongst the highest paid members of the city’s bureaucracy, a fact which speaks volumes” (13). Despite the obstacles, citizens persist in fighting for the right to shape their city the way they see fit. This occurs, Roussopoulos writes, when people ask themselves “the essential question...: ‘To whom should the city belong?’” (13).

The transformation of Toronto into a megacity and Montreal’s subsequent attempt to follow suit are covered extensively in the cities’ respective chapters. Such amalgamations, the politicians and planners told the citizens, improved efficiency in transit and stimulated the economy. In reality, this book explains, these economy-based justifications masked the city officials’ self-interest and their deep-seated doubts in the ability of ordinary people to govern themselves. The desire of politicians to further “tilt power towards those with commercial interests and deliver the benefits of government to the economic elite” (146) severely threatened “the control that people had over their cities, towns, and communities” (105).

In Montréal, the formation of a megacity resulted in the transfer of the urban planning process to each individual borough. On the surface, this decentralization looks positive. In practice, however, even after the demerger, it means the boroughs are no longer required to hold city-

wide public consultations, and the boroughs' urban planning advisory committees "often meet in private and don't hold public hearings" (63). The redevelopment of Montréal's working-class Griffintown borough by large private developers was the first major planning failure of the city's municipal reorganization, according to Roussopoulos and Shawn Katz. Development was allowed to go ahead, with only a "brief and partial public consultation process" (65), which critics quickly dismissed as a charade. Roussopoulos and Katz give this example as a warning of what is at stake when residents do not participate in planning processes – an entire neighbourhood in this case. Perhaps with *Projet Montréal*, a municipal party formed initially as an activist group, having just won a majority of council seats and its candidate Valérie Plante now mayor, Montréal might be on its way to becoming a stalwart of direct democracy and urban ecology.

In Toronto, "one of the most remarkable public planning exercises ever attempted" (145), Bill Freeman writes, has been the redevelopment of the city's waterfront. The appropriately named Waterfront Toronto, a government agency, has allowed a number of volunteers to meet regularly with planners, designers and architects, resulting in improved development plans. When city councillor Doug Ford tried to push through an unimaginative waterfront plan that included a large shopping mall and a ferris wheel, the agency's volunteers formed a citizens' group called Code Blue. The group's "campaign underlined that the Fords were simply out of their depth in dealing with sophisticated planning issues" and with the help of extensive media coverage, "[the plan], and the Ford brothers with it, were converted into a laughing stock" (146).

"Greater Vancouver," writes Patrick Smith, "is the essential 'odd one out' to the Canadian re-metropolitanization trend of 'bigger is better'" (176). Although the metro area has yet to amalgamate, the city planning remains centralized, as seen through the region's public transit body. TransLink, which was set up by the province, rejected local ideas to fund the transit network, such as a tax on vehicles, essentially refusing to give any control of transit planning to the municipalities.

Ann Marie Utratel's concluding chapter covers the successes of citizens' coalitions in influencing municipal elections in Barcelona and Madrid. Since the anti-austerity, 15M Movement in Spain erupted in 2011, "a large part of this activism has since moved indoors from the streets and squares to government posts, but this did not come easily" (200). Utratel gives the example of Ada Colau, who in 2015 was elected mayor of Barcelona. In 2009, Colau was one of the founding members of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (*Platform for People Affected by Mortgages*), a housing rights group consisting of people taking direct

action against evictions, often forming human barricades between police and homeowners. “Where 15M once had people in the streets and squares chanting “no nos representa” - “they don’t represent us” - now, in Ada Colau, they have a mayor who emerged from the movement itself” (202). However, winning and gaining power must be distinguished from one another: “to gain effective power takes a very empowered citizenship, and citizens are starved of power” (203). Luckily, Utratel avoids the best practices trap – ““recipes” are impossible” (203) – and instead provides some vital “tips and tricks” for empowerment and addressing concrete needs: “organize for what already exists, don’t over-politicize, keep to the needs of people in the communities, and work up from small steps” (206).

Despite the success of a number of citizen-led participatory movements, victories on the left are often matched, even outpaced, by victories on the right. Utratel keenly recognizes that the “left, however, seems to communicate in abstracts, which creates rather than solves problems at the local level. People do not want abstract terms, they want concrete solutions” (202). Democracy, co-operation, participation and solidarity are important but cannot exist in a rhetorical vacuum. After all, corporate and elitist groups rely on co-opting these abstract notions to advance their own agendas.

It is this awareness, that realizable plans of action crafted at the local level and achieved through municipal politics are critical to meet the concrete needs of the people, that each chapter of *The Rise of Cities* emphasizes in consummate detail. However, the three chapters on Canadian cities mostly mirror each other in their sometimes-tedious chronicling of municipal politics. However, they fail to reflect the more radical discourse framed by both the introduction and the final chapter. Greater consistency would have been possible if the three chapters devoted more space to truly grassroots and autonomous movements, rather than only to those citizens’ movements which have achieved “legitimacy” in the eyes of city governments. Further, if the incredible modern-era growth has meant “cities are now regarded as corporations in their own right” (12), then in order for people to take their cities back, Roussopoulos’ essential question, “To whom should the city belong?” must be appended with, “... and who has been benefiting from the rise of cities?” This book is most likely to be of use to graduate students, independent researchers, and curious city dwellers who want to understand how municipal government operates and the forces that drive its politicians.

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