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Willem Salet

Paul Kantor, Christian Lefèvre, Asato Saito, H. V. Savitch, Andy Thornley, *Struggling Giants. City-Region Governance in London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo*

Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013

- 1 It needed the cooperation of very experienced researchers in urban political governance to address the all-embracing theme of thirty years governance in four of the largest city-regions of the globe: London, New York, Paris and Tokyo. The title of the book *Struggling Giants* already reveals the elusive nature of the subject. Governability of mega cities is not a matter of straight authority but a pluralistic contest of public and private sector influence at all levels of scale. The authors wisely decided for a selective approach to analyze this multi-level reality. Rather than analyzing the governance of the city-regions as a sole product of compelling global influences, they decided to focus on specific intermediate variables and to “consider policy responses and intergovernmental changes within particular political contexts” (p.12). They aim to identify areas of collective action where mediation by public forces matters. Without neglecting the structural power of macro-economic and social systems, the authors focus on the different ways in which this is manifested and combined with the operational policy pathways, intergovernmental politics and political divergence. The model focuses on the ways in which under conditions of globalization, specific political contexts (such as nation-state relationships and specifications of environmental context) mediate in processes of governability. The empirical parts explore the areas of economic development, the environment, social welfare, and the quality of life.
- 2 The institutional and political conditions are highly different in the four regions. While liberalism prevails in the American context and market forces take the lead in the development of the New York City-region, the proverbial interventionism of the French state creates a public led intermediate context in the city-region of Paris. The contextual specification of London and Tokyo are positioned somewhere in-between with developmental roles for the state in direct partnership with the market. In all cases, the state, the core city and the market are the corner stones of the political configurations in the city-region but the interrelationships between these power houses differ highly in the four institutional contexts. It must be noted that in the American case, not the federal state is analyzed but the tri-state model of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut which is most comparable to the national states in the other cases. The decision to investigate the four mega-cities at city-regional level of scale is crucial; it enabled the authors to address the highly dynamic and often contradictory and asymmetrical relationships between the core city and the successive rings of the extending metropolises.
- 3 The political configuration of global city-region London is highly divided. Most efforts for city-regional organization have been taken in the core of the metropolis, first in the 1980s and renewed in 2000 via the Greater London Authority (GLA) with its elected major. GLA produced strategic policy in close connection with the business community (economic world position, urban condensation, infrastructure and the environment); the social agenda did not materialize. The global city-region of London, however, encompasses a far wider urbanized area in the South East. This regional context is highly decentralized (over hundreds of boroughs); at regional level there are only agencies under the auspices of the central state. There are crucial issues to be addressed at city-regional level as the main infrastructures, such as airports and seaports, are in this wider region; there is also social polarization between the prospering areas in the south west versus the poor districts in the east; there are issues of social housing, public transport and the environment. The central state takes over the responsibility for this regional agenda but focuses solely on the economic and infrastructure priorities.

- 4 Surprisingly, also in the case of global city-region New York – the most decentralized and market led of all cases - it is the state (the tri-state in this particular context) of which most collective action is to be expected in the political configuration of the city-region. Obviously, the city of New York is in a more than capable position because of its primacy in the global financial economy and the tight connections between market and the city. However, a lot of collective action is needed at regional level (again including the most important infrastructure and social issues) which exceeds the interests of the local government. It is here that non-governmental organizations and the (willing, not-willing) cooperation between the three states have to fill the vacancy. Apparently, economic targets, in particular with regards to strategic infrastructure, have the highest priority in this collective action; environmental issues and social issues are not achieved in the political configuration of the city-region of New York.
- 5 Next, the French case demonstrates an outspoken public led political configuration of the Paris city- region. There is abundant agenda at this level of scale. Main infrastructure is beyond the central core, there is strong polarization between prosperous urban peripheries in the west (in particular department Hauts de Seine) and the impoverished areas in the north-east, there are social problems - even riots - in marginalized areas, asymmetries of accessibility in the outside parts and lacking environmental qualities. The business sector is not very strongly organized at regional level. Thus, the public sector pulls all the strings and the issues at stake are typically public sector priorities! However, the French do not manage to organize this effectively. The decentralized political configuration makes too many locals too mighty without providing capabilities for dispute resolution. The region is toothless, enabling the central state and the city of Paris to act as primate sources of power. This configuration is colored by different political interests. The state recently unfolded a pro-growth agenda (for the first time in the region) and built an alliance with the western outside parts and business in order to promote the Grand Paris program (fast transport connection between airports and economic centers). On the other hand, the left mayor of Paris managed to join development with left areas in the first ring; this agenda includes social housing, quality of life issues and public transportation.
- 6 Finally, the political configuration of the city-region Tokyo builds forward on its historical ideology of ‘developmentalism’ according to which the state in an outspoken pro-active role involves the private sector to promote economic growth. This traditional partnership model trickles down to the level of the city-region. Regional government, however, plays no role in this configuration. Besides the leading national state, the Japanese system consists of de-concentrated prefectures and local government. There are 4 prefectures in regional Tokyo, of which TMG is the strongest (TMG is the prefecture in the core of the region). After decades of success, the closed partnership model of the Japanese economy ran into problems in the 1990s. In the last ten years the state is following a renewed pro-growth program to promote the recovery of the national economy and in doing so it beds in particular on its strongest horse of concentrated service and financial economy in the CBD and central core of Tokyo, making TMG very important. At wider city-regional level, however, the asymmetry is increasing, resulting in a regional agenda of polarized areas (prosperous in the core versus increasing poverty in outside areas, in particular in the East). Economic policy is extremely concentrated and not very well addressed in the wider region, also equity and immigration issues are not addressed at level of city region. An interesting exemption regards environmental policies. Environmental policies are very well integrated in the Japanese culture and in the economy, these policies are actively addressed through all levels of scale.
- 7 Overall, the book produces a very rich and precise analysis of the dynamic processes of regional governance in four mega-cities. It is an absolute must for students in the full range of urban studies. The basic question whether global city-regions are governable must be answered with nuance because of the differentiation of mediating variables in different political configurations. It is clear that the asymmetry of political configurations is reproduced in the asymmetric outcomes of economic, social and environmental policies. The interests of the state are prominent with regards to economic competitiveness and the promotion of fast infrastructure connections with international economic networks. It appears to be far more difficult to address the additional questions of the city-regional agenda: the issues of

social polarization and marginalizing areas in the urban periphery, the prevailing of radiated networks of transportation, the mismatches of working and living areas, the issues of the environment and the fragmentary landscapes. In some cases the market is leading, while in the public led cases the primacy of central state and core city generate more specific barriers for collective action. Global city-regions have changed dramatically in the last twenty years but are struggling to define adequate responsiveness and problem ownership for the new issues at regional level of scale.

Référence(s)

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