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This edited volume promises a European-based overview of 60 years of reforms in local government policies and the evolution of urban governance practices. The editors organize the book by focusing on three driving forces, which explain in part these reforms in local government and the dynamic changes in urban governance over time: (i) the transition to democracy in the mid-1970s and early 1990s, (ii) the 2008 financial and economic crisis and (iii) the implementation of European Union (EU) urban policies.

The book is written in a fairly accessible format. Footnotes offering a significant quantity of information on planning instruments and mechanisms and EU directives and urban policies currently in force in the selected cases, are a major strength of the book. While this may appear less important to a more experienced planner or policymaker, it will certainly be of help to those studying or researching planning and governance in Europe and beyond; this is, in my opinion, the primary target readership of this collection of essays. After the introduction chapter, the book is organized in three parts. The first part has four chapters focused on the development and innovations of local self-government in Europe. The second part has five chapters dealing with EU urban policies and initiatives. The third, and last part of the book, contains two chapters investigating citizen participation in local government decision making. As it would be beyond the scope of this review to detail each chapter, I have instead engaged with those chapters in each part which, contribute most to existing planning theory and practice.

Chapter 5 (Part I), focuses on local government reforms in Italy, with particular attention to regional governance and planning innovations in Milan as a metropolitan area. The chapter contributes to current discussions on strategic spatial planning and urban governance in two key ways. Firstly, it gives evidence that urban regions have been increasingly engaging with strategic spatial planning and reframing governance settings by institutionalizing metropolitan areas, as stated in Albrechts, Balducci and Hillier (2017). Secondly, it shows that a single law, specifically Law 56 of 7th April 2014, “is not enough to provide [Italian] institutions with modern and effective governance and planning practices” (p. 105). The key finding of this chapter reinforces Fedeli’s (2017) account of the same legislation who suggests that this law disappoints planning theorists and practitioners, mostly because of the poorly-informed definition of metropolitan boundaries. Perhaps the chapter could have been more ambitious and gone further to propose possible ways of overturning the weakness of the law.

Chapter 6 (Part II) contributes to the existing body of literature on Europeanisation and territorial governance (Mourato, 2011) and on Europeanisation and spatial planning practice (Faludí, 2014) as it addresses the impacts of EU urban policies on the EU member states. The chapter specifically highlights the fact that the role of local-level government, as well as the institutional frameworks of urban governance, have significantly changed under the influence of the EU. By taking Croatia as a case study, the chapter underlines the fact that there are 16 EU principles of good local government, all of which have been implemented in the laws and bylaws of this member state. On one hand the author suggests that the Europeanization process in Croatia has been smooth; on the other hand the author claims that “there remains
room for improvement” (p. 129). The author recommends the national government to entrust local governments with a greater responsibility in spatial planning and to “regulate the framework for the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes of local public policies” (p. 129). From the 16 principles of good local government highlighted in this chapter, the principle of citizen participation in local public affairs, the principle of partnership to achieve objectives that are difficult to achieve without cooperation, and the principle of exchange of best practices between local and national governments, could have been employed by the editors to align this chapter with those in Part I dedicated to innovative practices in local government. The editors, in my estimation, could have included subsections tightening together the key arguments of each part. For example, an operational framework synthesizing new urban governance settings, before and after the implementation of EU policies in general and the enactment of the good local government principles in particular, would have been enriching for planning literature and practice. The results of this chapter could facilitate benchmarking of further analysis on European integration processes, thus bridging the gap in the literature.

The key statement of Chapter 12 (Part III), and the one that adds more to current understandings on local direct democracy and voter mobilization (Dvořák, Zouhar and Novák, 2017), is that “a long-enduring history and strong institutionalization of local direct democracy…contribute to a good official voter information” (p. 254). By drawing from examples of local voter information platforms in Vienna and Bregenz (Austria) and Los Angeles (USA), the chapter illustrates that in these three cases the politicization of voter information is always present. The author stresses that this politicization can “preclude voters making informed decisions at the polls” (p. 233). Despite this insightful remarks, I would have found this chapter more useful if it had drawn lessons from the case studies analysed in previous chapters of the book, which describe less mature practices of local direct democracy compared to cases investigated in this chapter.

As my reading and analysis advanced, I felt that the promised line of reasoning for innovative reforms and practices in urban governance was being dissipated, mainly because I was unable to draw a clear line linking the chapters in a common narrative, or at least linking the chapters of Part I with those of Part II and III. Hence, my understanding of the key contribution of the book to existing knowledge was also seldom being fuelled. I was doubtful whether supra-local conditions, such as the overthrow of the dictatorship in 1974 and a new constitution in 1976 in Portugal (chapter 2) or a change of political regime in Slovakia prompted by post-Communist transformation (chapter 3), were pivotal in local government reforms, compared to those reforms imposed by the austerity policies of the post-2008 economic crisis, such as the parish merger reform in Portugal.

Recent literature highlights how, together with economic competitiveness, the simplification of a multi-layered public administration and austerity measures have powerfully shaped recent local government and urban governance reforms (Zimmerman & Getimis, 2017). However, the book misses a chance to expand on this debate. In a similar vein to Fedeli (2017), the contributors could perhaps have highlighted the path-dependent, and/or path-breaking, relationships between these three driving forces, perhaps enabling some interesting reflections on whether the impacts of the economic crisis were more prominent in
countries which have adopted democratic regimes in recent decades, compared with those territories with more rooted democratic practices.

The book ends suddenly with the concluding remarks of chapter 12. I would have expected, and recommended, the addition of a concluding chapter summarizing the key findings of the book. The editors do provide some such remarks at the end of chapter 1, though not to the extent that such an empirically-informed book deserves. While each chapter contributes to knowledge on the driving forces influencing local government reforms, they do not really contribute to the formation of a coherent whole. It would therefore have been interesting and useful to synthesize the contributions of each chapter in relation to the two main concepts debated in the book – local government and urban governance. Perhaps the editors could have provided this summary by emphasizing to what extent the democratic shift or the transference of EU policies to national legislation have contributed to upheaval in the economic and financial activity of a number of EU member states, with consequences for both the functioning of local government and the modes of governing cities. Andreotti and Mingione (2014) for example highlight how the economic crisis has had a differential impact in different European, national and local contexts. Southern European cities were dramatically affected by unemployment and poverty, having minimal public funds and private and voluntary sectors which have been rendered fragile and more vulnerable by the crisis. The impacts of the economic crisis on local government decision-making capacity and on urban governance, a theme evident throughout, might therefore have functioned as a main organising concept, drawing out a line of argument and aligning the various contributions.

The continuous economic and financial disruption evident in European countries in general and cities specifically, together with issues like the permanent fiscal crisis and austerity measures, increased inequalities and uncontrolled migration flows, will almost certainly trigger further additional administrative reforms and the resetting of governance mechanisms. This book contributes to some extent to the much-needed critical appraisal of the driving forces behind recent institutional reforms and the key challenges confronting the governance of cities in Europe. My main concern, however, is that the chapters are not well articulated in a way that could provide stronger statements to advance planning practice and local government studies within such disruptive socio-economic scenario.

References


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