

**Book Review - The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy**

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## Book Review

# The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy

Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley

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Opening his epic study *Cities in Civilisation*, the late Peter Hall harks back to the 'golden age' of the European Renaissance. Like every such golden age, he observes, it was an urban age. History shows, he adds, 'that golden urban ages are rare and special windows of light, that briefly illuminate the world both within them and outside them, and then again are shuttered' (Hall, 1998, pp. 3-4).

Hall's *magnum opus* sits within a genre of urban studies that depict the city, for all its failings, as the zenith of human achievement. For Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley (2013) this is a story that has just begun: a new 'metropolitan revolution' is taking place.

Theirs is an American revolution, set against a metropolitan/federal cleavage that is particular to the United States. But it is of interest to readers worldwide because it is being assiduously exported, not least through the expert advice provided to city leaders by the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., where Katz is the inaugural Centennial Scholar and Bradley was a policy expert. And it sits within a burgeoning public and political discourse on cities, from global institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations to the UK government's promotion of a Northern Powerhouse and 'city deals' to devolve centrally held powers.

But in an era where 'revolution' is a sales pitch for everything from coffee to cosmetics, is Katz and Bradley's version more than the rebranding of a particular genre of urban economics? The answer is not straightforward because at times it can be hard to disentangle the book's empirical analysis from its ideational marketing.

Katz and Bradley leave few hyperboles unturned in setting out their stall. The opening chapter contrasts the fusty Weberian bureaucracy of federal and state government with the new action heroes of municipal leadership. A revolution of urban governance, sparked by the cleansing fires of the Great Recession, is coming. Its engine is innovation and its grand ambition is 'a local economy that generates wealth and shares prosperity', an end and a means sufficiently loosely sketched that few would quibble. 'The metropolitan revolution has only one logical conclusion: the inversion of the hierarchy of power in the United States,' they proclaim (p. 5). This is

cast as a revolution of networks rather than hierarchies, distributed rather than centralised power, and agility rather than rule-following.

These are bold claims, and the book sets out to evidence their rhetoric. It does so through four case studies of US 'metros' or city-regions. The first of these, New York, firmly positions Katz and Bradley's work within the agglomeration and competitiveness tradition of Michael Porter (1998). The role of urban governance here is to identify and facilitate clusters of innovative activity. As in Hall's *Cities in Civilisation*, the successful polis is a technopolis. New York, in this narrative, is reinventing itself through tech-driven entrepreneurship, enabled by city planners who have thrown their weight behind the creation of two major new science and engineering graduate campuses.

The second case study, focusing on Denver, examines the growth of collaboration between urban and suburban authorities to achieve shared economic development goals. The emphasis is on partnership and resource pooling. Katz and Bradley then turn to northeast Ohio, putting the spotlight on a declining industrial area and examining how networks of innovation are held together through a multiplicity of 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). Interestingly, they contrast such networks with tales of heroic leadership in language that is more nuanced than that of their opening salvos.

Lastly, the authors turn to the neighbourhood, focusing on community-level work in Houston, Texas. The case study of the Neighborhood Centers nonprofit organisation is revealing: it is an entrepreneurial model of community support, viewed by Katz and Bradley as a member of the same genus as the deal-brokering mayor of Denver or the enterprise networks of northeast Ohio. Whether the setting is New York media-land or an apartment block housing refugees in Houston, it seems, the toolkit required is similar.

The next three chapters set out the key implements in that toolkit. Exhibit A is the innovation district, a concept the authors have described elsewhere as:

*...the ultimate mash up of entrepreneurs and educational institutions, start-ups and schools, mixed-use development and medical innovations, bike-sharing and bankable investments—all connected by transit, powered by clean energy, wired for digital technology, and fuelled by caffeine. (Brookings Institution, n.d.)*

In slightly less double-espresso language, the authors here depict innovation districts as 'both competitive places (respecting the dramatic impact that innovative, traded sectors have on broader metropolitan economies) and cool spaces (reflecting the revaluation of liability, walkability, and authenticity in neighbourhood design).' Imagine an omelette of Jane Jacobs' urbanism and Michael Porter's clusters, dashed with the Tabasco of Richard Florida's creative class theory. The concept raises the challenge grappled with not entirely convincingly by Peter Hall: how to move from describing the successes of the past or present to specifying the factors that will ensure future prosperity. The latter has defeated many a planner, although without noticeably slowing the flow of prescriptions.

Exhibit B in the toolkit is a 'network of global trading cities'. Inspired by the medieval example of the Hanseatic League, it envisages global trade becoming dominated by peer to peer networks of metros, fuelled by innovation and mutual interest. Again this is a familiar trope for followers of urban literature; it is cluster theory writ large, supported by citations of the outputs of McKinsey and Company. Katz and Bradley's point is that central government is increasingly irrelevant. As an argument against parochialism and navel-gazing it is forceful; as a prediction of the future it may be premature.

The third exhibit in the toolkit is the infinitely adjustable wrench of governance. Metros, the authors declare, are the new sovereign. But they quickly pedal back from that rhetoric, advancing a fuzzier but more grounded notion of coproduction, with a negotiation of powers between metropolitan, state and federal levels. 'We are trying to advance a theory of federalism that asks how federal and state sovereigns, and other partners and networks in governance, should interact to coproduce the economy,' the authors argue (p. 178).

Such modest, commonsense language may sound surprising in a book that claims to be advancing a revolution. So in the final chapter we are back to the streets, waving the banner of unleashed economies and reshaped cities. Readers are promised a revolution that will 'repair what ails the United States, a political system mired in ruinous partisanship and ideological division' (p. 205).

One must question, though, whether this revolution is more than the sum of its parts. The authors occasionally descend into a logic of 'you'll know it when you see it'. In conversation with urban leaders, they say, '[y]ou can predict in a quarter of an hour which metros are on a path to attract talent, crack hard problems, and make important choices' (p. 195). If true, this could save much unnecessary spending on McKinsey and Company's services. However, the persistence of 'wicked issues' in the US and beyond might suggest the presence of complexities that demand more than a reconfiguration of central-metropolitan relations turbocharged with a zing of entrepreneurship.

For all Katz and Bradley's revolutionary fervour, much remains unsaid. Power and inequality are present, but largely uncritiqued. The global south and its challenges and opportunities are missing. Climate change sits in the background, both as a threat and an economic opportunity, but with little sense of urgency. The geographical hinterland is an unexplored backdrop to the urban heroics of metropolitan actors.

There is more to this work than the question of which elites are best placed to pursue an agenda of competitive accumulation. Yet little attention is paid to the losers in such contests or the consequences of their losses. At a time when Detroit and Atlantic City have had to sacrifice metropolitan sovereignty to state-appointed emergency managers, one might question what kind of citizenship is on offer in the twenty-first century American city. The illumination of the metropolitan revolution, like the 'golden ages' observed by Peter Hall, may turn out to be brief and partial. For those buying into the notion of innovation districts, the watchwords might be *caveat emptor*.

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