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BOOK REVIEW

Patrick Le Galès (ed.) (2020) *Gouverner la métropole parisienne*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po. 335 pages. ISBN : 9782724626551. DOI : 10.3917/scpo.legal.2020.01. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/gouverner-la-metropole-parisienne--9782724626551.htm>

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Paris has famously always been governed by spectacle. Starting this review under the impression of the 2022 World Cup brings this to mind easily. After the French team's victories in 1998 and 2018, the streets of Paris were filled with massive crowds. Even in 2022, a second-place French national team returned from Qatar to be feted by "rapturous crowds" at Place de la Concorde in the centre of the capital (France 24, 2022). Soccer is one spectacle that undergirds the power of the state and builds bridges across the socio-spatial divides that normally plague the French capital. In 2018, "Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, hosted the players and coaches at the presidential palace, along with hundreds of young footballers from the poorer suburbs" (Roche, 2022). Football may be the big connector bringing the often-fractious metropolitan region together. The history of Paris St.Germain, which famously employs the two central figures of the World Cup final and is owned by investors from the exact country where the tournament in December 2022 took place, speaks to the ways in which Paris as a city is always stitched together and governed by the competing forces of local power and at once a product of interests beyond its reach, yet constitutive of it: the state and global capital. The club's renewal in the second decade of the 21st century is eerily parallel to the formation of Paris as a city that is more than the capital of France (if that was not enough) but a regional megalopolis that seems to defy being governed through local politics as it is usually understood. Yet, it is still constituted very much by local agency, by the institutions that structure the everyday functioning of

urban life. As is the case with the football club which is suspended between competing social forces and registers of meaning, governing and governance of the city takes place in a complex web of global and local dependencies, central and peripheral relationships that mark both class and racialization as important categories, and the intricate and often contested interactions between the banlieue and the centre, the region and the city, the state and the *commune*.

Gouverner la metropole parisienne is a complex and fascinating book that hides its brilliance behind an understated appearance makes the reader long for a more glitzy representation. Yet, the book shines through its ability to present a kind of Paris that most readers, even those who are “urban experts” or “urbanists” to use a term from Henri Lefebvre, don’t usually hear about. Its title may itself be a bit of a provocation as it presupposes the possibility, indeed, of the governability of Paris which many may think impossible. Yet, governable it is, albeit as a “particular territory” as Francesca Artioli and Pauline Prat remind us in Chapter 5 which deals with measuring and governing the capital region (143).

The volume cuts through the historico-geographical stereotypes one usually encounters with the “City of Light”, the growing disparities of a shiny gentrified core and a metropolitan ring punctured with massive tower neighbourhoods in the suburban expanse; a perfectly designed and timed 15-minute city of innovation and a regional mesh beyond the *peripherique* that works more on the scale of endless commutes and is determined by the anaesthetics of the *Zwischenstadt*.

The book is characterized by a prudent and careful tone and style of evaluation. It is masterfully edited and curated by the uniquely positioned doyen of French urban politics, Patrick Le Galès, CNRS research director and professor at Sciences Po. Other world cities have sometimes been subject to hyperbolic claim making. Paris, while treated for all that it is with respect to its significance in the world of cities, is not presented as the source of yet another pivotal urban theory or even a tsunami of new terminology.

The agenda of the book is clearly laid out in the editor’s succinct and elegant introduction. Presenting Paris as an “unexceptional” case, Le Galès notes:

“It is however characterized by its inclusion within a State historically built by strong processes of centralization on the one hand, by an opposition between the city of Paris and its suburbs on the other hand. This does not make the metropolis an ungovernable urban region, but feeds more or less articulated and conflictual governance processes as well as the creation of institutions aimed at establishing a more or less stabilized political order” (7).

Such operational frameworks have been strongly structured by “institutionalized inequalities that reproduced themselves over time”. (8) The book takes us into these institutional structures recognizing a tension of Paris’s metropolitan governance between, on one side, the elites and the state

and on the other “the networks of horizontal cooperations, structures by the antagonism of Paris and its banlieue”(8). And, as Le Galès doubles down further in the text, this opposition may also be characterized by the centre ignoring or dominating the periphery in the process (ibid.) Yet, still, the ambition to look at the metropolitan region in its remarkable totality drives this book – flatly illustrated also in the map that adorns the cover and spans the region. After all, governing that region is a multi-faceted affair with many participants and actors: “The Paris metropolis comprises all these persons [many named in the book], territories, collective facilities, buildings, its natural environments” (21).

The comment on the “networks of horizontal cooperations” is trenchant as it pinpoints a major theme in the book which more or less explicitly circumscribes a different democratic practice than the one that governs the Republic overall. In a provocative interview on the height of the protests against President Macron’s “réforme des retraites,” the reform of social security, in March 2023, European green politician and leader of the 1968 rebellion, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, commented on the office of the President in the republic which, under Macron, had become more akin to a “republican King”. But Cohn-Bendit goes farther and opines that Macron’s crisis shows the crisis of the “entire architecture of the Fifth Republic including its electoral system.” Said system does not allow for compromise but is based on a winner-take-all mentality into which both the ruled and the rulers play with their expectations of their respective roles. In France, Cohn-Bendit notes, the idea of a compromise, so central to the horizontal politics often associated with urban governance, is connoted negatively, like in the passive use of the English “compromised” rather than in the active use of the phrase “we reached a compromise” (Cohn-Bendit, 2023). The malaise of the French governance system is not just the subject of aperçus by one of France’s most illustrious political characters of the second half of the 20th century but also gets the attention of a broad spectrum of observers including the left-wing *Jacobin* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal*. Harrison Stetler (2023) writes in his scathing commentary that the goings-on around the pension reform demonstrate “the bankruptcy of a constitution that puts only minimal checks on the president’s power.” At the other end of the political spectrum, Matthew Dalton (2023) emphasizes the issue in the *WSJ* noting that “the French president is one of the most powerful among Western democracies, with authority to outlaw civic groups deemed a threat to public order and to pass legislation without parliament’s approval.” Meanwhile, *Le Monde diplomatique*’s Benoît Bréville has likened Macron to Margaret Thatcher and sees him fuel “disillusionment with democracy” as he crushes the – socially extremely diverse – opposition (2023). Across this wide spectrum, then, outside observers and French political insiders reported on in these contributions, have voiced concerns about democratic legitimacy and trust among governance institutions and actors in France.

By contrast to Cohn-Bendit’s sharp observation about the compromise-averse political culture in his country and the very similar notes by the cited journalists, this book takes seriously the democratic processes that create legitimacy instead of just mere technical power. Specifically, *Gouverner la métropole parisienne* examines political discourse and interaction at the local and regional level that

might end up in compromise – with the state above, but also among the many horizontalized actors across the urban region. In the centre of such dynamics has always been the process of a bourgeoisie governing the city and its markets and state capital governed by the nation’s government (16).

This doesn’t go well all the time, of course, and there are the more or less weighty “failures”, both of individual projects and of dealing with the region’s structural inequities (20). Like most urban regions, the city that once started by a river core (13) is now surrounded by a vast hinterland of logistics, packaging and warehousing in the widening periphery (19).

The introduction carries on with a nice nod to the late Bruno Latour, whose influence on the authors’ thinking is acknowledged but also tempered by the actor network theorist’s failure to acknowledge power dynamics at the core of governing and governance (23). So, is Paris “ungovernable” as one section heading in the volume asks? (23). Of course, not. There is always governing in the governance processes among the groups, territories and flows that make up Paris, and those are structured by two long term dynamics: the opposition of Paris and the rest of France and Paris and its banlieue as an issue and problem governed by the French state (28).

The book provides a kaleidoscope of approaches to government and governing: historical (like in the opening chapter by Emmanuel Bellanger) – with an important observation in these current times that in the past governance was often and dramatically linked with “pollution, epidemics and floods” (48) that could not easily be kept at bay outside the city. Biopolitics of water and health were institutionalized and made “public” (54), clearly a grand achievement of governing the metropolis. Meanwhile, despite such metropolitan civiness, the territorial lines of conflict divide the city and region continuously (61). Pauline Prat also takes a historical perspective in her investigation of the institutionalization of the prefecture as a modern state agency that governs “in proximity” (72) in two subsequent chapters that show both the systematic and idiosyncratic governance of the prefects over time. And she concludes, referring once again at the intertwined nature of local and state governance: “the regionalization of the state goes hand in hand with the permanence of the complexity of the Parisian state system” (118).

Sébastien Pradella follows with a chapter on a politics of land and capitalism, an interesting spotlight on past and present megaprojects, including the much publicized peripheral transit extensions that are described here as an “exceptional vector of land densification” (121). The chapter is a lucid explication of the Parisian model of a capitalism that is based on land and property. This model has shown to be resilient in the face of newer developments such financialization of housing, and it has never been an automatic process but one that is institutionally determined by conditions created two centuries ago (125). Outside the cadre of land governance, however, remain the “poorly-housed” and the “badly off” (129).

Patrick Le Lidec, in Chapter 6, provides a fascinating account of electoral politics, institutional resilience, the omnipresence of the state and the mundane tasks of municipal affairs in a dynamic city region. Equally, Renaud Epstein's brilliant exposé of the socio-spatial and municipal "double fragmentation" of the Paris region and its political consequences provides a candid insight into some of the opportunity structures and structural obstacles for governance in Paris. He outlines types of processes of social exclusion but also tendencies of "'moyennisation' of numerous residential spaces in the Paris region where there is a multiplicity of configurations of mixed neighbourhoods" (237). Altogether a refreshingly nuanced look at the Paris agglomeration. This is followed by Thomas Aguilera's remarkable essay about the "shadow of Greater Paris" and the "impossible metropolitan governance of the *bidonvilles* of the region" in which he concludes that "the public management of slums is at the core of the metropolitan question" – a question quite common to global cities. But he adds that "*bidonvilles* are not ungovernable in the sense that they would represent too complex a question or leaving the actors faced with a financial difficulty to act" but concludes, in a statement that reads like a summary of the entire book:

"The ungovernability comes from a game of actors who refuse to act and bear too great a political risk alone in competitive governance, while Paris is slow to collectivize opportunities and risks and Greater Paris does not yet have a metropolitan authority able to impose choices" (275).

Christine Barwick and Vlad Gross's chapter on network governance finally provides yet another critical look at the overall structure of governability in the region which leads to the open-ended outcome: while it is possible to underline "the existence of networks over time between different organizations" it is impossible to know "whether these networks are active or not" (296).

It is appropriate to end this book with a chapter on transportation as a conclusion of sorts in which both the volume's major themes and the institutional governance architecture and politics make an appearance in their diverse complexity. Charlotte Halpern and Patrick Le Galès do a masterful job pulling the lines of argument in the book together into a conceptual map that resembles the network maps of the rail lines that are the subject matter of this chapter. Everything comes together again here as we learn about both the always conflictual relationships of the state and the *communes* but also about the tremendous ability – despite all odds – of horizontal cooperation of the core municipality with those of the *banlieue* and of the suburban municipalities among themselves. The big suburban transportation projects of the past decade or so have been subject of both conflicts and their resolution in the context of decentralization and iterative, negotiated and innovative processes of building infrastructure under the impression of social movement activity on one hand and hard budgetary constraints on the other (309; 323).

We are left with the insight that many things are unique about the Paris region but many are also common and shared with other metropolitan areas, the rise of automobility (309) among them. This stands in stark contrast to the valiant efforts by municipal authorities and urbanist visionaries for

which Paris is now exemplary: to create a 15-minute urbanism of sorts. And we ask: will that work across the traditional socio-spatial divides that have been the subject of this book. One point to consider in reading this book may be this. As is often the case in French conversations on the subject “the state” is blackboxed, unexplained theoretically, taken for granted – this is not a criticism but an observation that may provide some background to reading the collection. Through a more active and critical use of language around the state, more theoretical insights may have been possible and comparative perspectives may have opened to places such as Berlin, Milan, London or Madrid at any given moment of “governing Paris”. That said, this is a magnificent volume with many conceptual and empirical highlights, indispensable to any scholar of Paris – or any large metropolitan region. And it teaches us that Paris is not governed by spectacle after all, but by politics.

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