Since the world financial crisis of the 1970s, most cities in the developed world have been governed and run for the benefit of capitalist elites and the creative classes. Support for the proletariat and the poor has declined, as cities have shifted from centers of manufacturing to an information and service economy. This neoliberal turn, as described by the geographer David Harvey (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* [2005]), has been characterized by the top-down privatization of many city services, often in wealthier neighborhoods, through familiar mechanisms of public-private partnership, such as parks, conservancies, and business improvement districts, which often exacerbate inequality.

At the same time, a countermovement of grassroots activists has developed to promote a more progressive dream: the local management of resources, including vacant land and underutilized infrastructure to mitigate the ever-increasing resource disparities between the urban rich and the urban poor. The “co-city” posited by Sheila R. Foster and Christian Iaione is an ambitious framework that “captures and reflects the ways that some cities are moving or being pushed toward embracing practices that are fostering social innovation in urban services provision, spurring collaborative economies as a driver of local economic development, and promoting inclusive and equitable urban regeneration of blighted areas” (p. 4).

*Co-Cities* lays down a theoretical framework and design principles for local institutions to democratically manage urban commons. Commendably, it goes beyond theory to a systematic empirical study of institutions that attempt comanagement, based on a survey and database with information collected on projects in 140 cities all over the world. The scope and methodology of this impressive project is outlined in an appendix and available on a website, along with an open access version of the book (https://commoning.city/).

Through rigorous empirical testing of their theories, the authors demonstrate both the feasibility of such arrangements and the difficulty of
truly sustained democratic management of the commons. Their theory of an urban commons derives from the work of the Nobel Prize-winning political economist Elinor Ostrom. Ostrom challenged one of the seminal ideas of 1970s environmentalism (and neoliberalism), as laid out by Garrett Hardin in his famous article, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968), which argued that the self-interest of individual participants in a common scheme would lead to the eventual exhaustion and extinction of common resources.[1]

Ostrom surveyed actual schemes for user management of common natural resources, such as fisheries and what she found was not a tragedy. Local decentralized democratic institutions in the real world were mostly successful in conserving common resources and maintaining their sustainability. Transferring Ostrom’s ideas from natural resource management to the management of urban resources, including vacant land, buildings, and other human-created urban infrastructure, Foster and Iaione argue that the first step in creating more egalitarian cities is to find ways to remove some urban real estate and infrastructure from the market and transform it into a sustainable urban commons that provides resources for the needy.

Co-Cities draws on several additional theoretical sources, such as Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “Right to the City” (see Le droit à la ville [1968]), Harvey’s elaboration of Lefebvre’s ideas in the context of neoliberalism, and Nicholas Blomley’s declaration of the right of impoverished people to be accorded some form of urban property rights.[2] Co-Cities also critiques Richard Florida’s creative class theory, which identifies the stratification caused by the influx of urban gentry, but is unclear about how to mitigate these inequalities.

The book also tries to incorporate some ideas from the smart cities movement, an engineering trend that uses information technologies and particularly big data to improve the efficiency of urban infrastructure and (in its more progressive versions) seeks to mitigate the digital divide between rich and poor. Smart cities advocates argue that a city networked with sensors can be more sensibly managed, that information technology can also inform citizens, armed with data, and that communications tools can (in the utopian vision) enable them to speak truth to power. As the authors show, that democratic tech vision often comes off the rails because of its corporate sponsorship and top-down power dynamics. The co-cities concept is an attempt to return data-based approaches to improving urban infrastructure to a more democratic footing by advocating for open data and citizen science. Using the example of Google’s failed Sidewalk Labs project in Toronto, which was abandoned because of increasing citizen opposition to collection of residents’ data, the authors conclude that “the tensions embedded in the ideation of the smart city can manifest in a lack of trust between public authorities and communities who are seen as its beneficiaries” (p. 11).

Foster and Iaione turn the smart cities model on its head by positing a program that starts with the vision of urban infrastructure as a shared commons. They call for technologies that can deploy commonly held property, including data, as a resource for poorer citizens. They define that commons as “a shared infrastructure on which a variety of urban actors can cooperate and pool resources and where various initiatives of collective action can emerge, flourish, and become sustainable” (p. 19). For them, the purpose of the commons is to produce an egalitarian space to counter what they see as the increasing enclosure of common space by private interests.

As historians who have studied republics know, maintaining truly democratic and independent institutions of the interests that seek to capture them is a dicey business, requiring hard work, sometimes more than uncompensated citizens can give. History is littered with big programs with democratic aspirations, such as the

H-Net Reviews
Tennessee Valley Authority and New York City's school decentralization plan. These programs often fail to achieve their initial democratic aspirations, which are eventually displaced by stakeholders with more direct interest than the proverbial person in the street. It is surely no coincidence that many of the most advanced case studies in the book come from southern Europe, and particularly Emilia Romagna, an area with a rich thousand-year history of commune, the Italian term for local government, a word in close linguistic sympathy with the idea of an urban commons.

Foster and Iaione are academic lawyers, so they are well aware of how democratic initiatives can degenerate. They emphasize rigorous analyses of case studies and highlight both the benefits and the limitations of schemes, such as Bologna’s Regulation for Collaboration between Citizens and the City for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons. They brilliantly theorize the reasons for the lack of diversity in the stakeholders who have come together to make pacts under the Bologna regulation. The comprehensiveness of this empirical work comes into play as they compare Bologna’s experience to other co-city projects in nearby Reggio Emilia, Turin, Naples, and Barcelona.

The more than five hundred case studies of co-city projects inform the five design principles of co-city projects that the authors set forth. Collective, or co-governance, means a multi-stakeholder governance arrangement between a community and four other types of actors: public authorities, private entities, commercial entities, civil society, organizations, and knowledge institutions, for example, universities or libraries. Enabling state means that the local government has a designated path for creating co-city entities. Social and economic pooling is the creation of autonomous, transparent, and accountable institutions that bring the stakeholders together. Experimentalism is “the presence of an adaptive, iterative, and place-based approach” (p. 25). Just as the authors move in an exemplary fashion between theory and practice, so must individual projects be open to experimentation and change that brings their practice in line with their objectives. Finally, tech justice “highlights access, participation, and co-management and/or co-ownership of technological and digital urban infrastructure and data” (p. 26).

Co-Cities is a useful and (in the Jamesian sense) pragmatic resource for urban reform that tries to test ideals with experience. The book’s emphasis on democracy and on empirical experience suggests multiple paths for the creation of more democratic and egalitarian co-cities. Beth Simone Noveck’s recent Solving Public Problems: A Practical Guide to Fix Our Government and Change Our World (2021) is a useful adjunct to Co-Cities, as it is more specifically prescriptive about the need for human-centered design and far more specific about techniques for fusing democracy and expertise. Reading these two works together will provide a robust guide to create new alternatives that enrich the commons, promote social justice, and offer effective alternatives to the relentless privatization of power and resources at the expense of the commonwealth.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59013

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.