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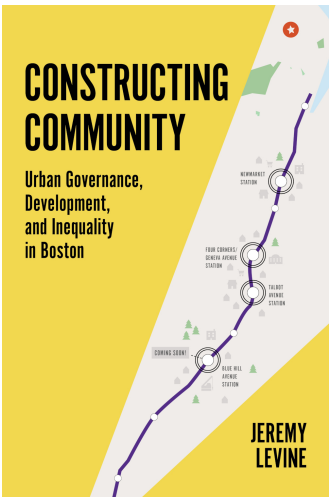
Book Reviews

Jeremy R. Levine 2021: Constructing Community: Urban Governance, Development, and Inequality in Boston. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press



In a famously polemical review essay published in 2002, the sociologist Loïc Wacquant admonished urban ethnographers to shift their attention from the lives of the urban poor to the sites where the big decisions that shape cities and their inhabitants' lives are made. Since then, a growing number of urban ethnographers have followed Wacquant's call, illuminating the power of developers, landlords and community organizations, amongst others. Jeremy Levine's *Constructing Community* fits squarely into this literature.

Based on five years of fieldwork in Boston's Fairmount Corridor, Levine examines how an overlapping set of large-scale development projects—spanning transit, housing, greenspace, service delivery, and more—was planned and implemented. Levine's main finding is that a coalition of community-based organizations (CBOs) and local foundations exercise an enormous amount of influence over these developments, while elected politicians and residents have little power to influence them. The main reason for this, Levine argues, is that CBOs claim legitimacy as organizational representatives of 'the community', and that foundations, corporations and the state need them in order to implement projects that are successful and, allegedly, consistent with residents' needs and interests.

In six main chapters Levine discusses (1) the history of community development policy in Boston and beyond, tracing the rise of non-profit CBOs, foundations, and public-private partnerships; (2) how CBOs gained a 'seat at the table' in the coalition that governed development in the Fairmount Corridor by performing the role of community-rooted, collaborative partners; (3) how CBOs made and remade the spatial boundaries of the Fairmount Corridor; (4) how the Fairmount Corridor coalition influenced development projects, frequently bypassing or sidelining elected officials; (5) how the coalition variously strengthened some CBOs while neglecting others, especially those from resource-deprived neighborhoods that urgently needed funding and projects; and (6) how resident demands at community meetings were sometimes ignored or restated in ways that fitted with CBO interests.

There is much to praise about Levine's book. Probably its main strength is his impressive access to closed-door meetings and planning events. Levine shows how CBO leaders, foundation staff and assorted professionals worked with funders and public administrators to create sweeping development plans that elected officials and residents got to see only in their finished state, frequently powerless to shape or reject them. The author does not expose malice or smoky backrooms—the Fairmount Corridor coalition really did advance what its members viewed as 'community' needs and interests. However, as Levine appropriately emphasizes, it did so without democratic accountability or transparency. And at least sometimes, it compounded urban inequality by leaving out neighborhoods where no strong organizational partner could be found—thus paradoxically ignoring some of the areas in greatest need.

Constructing Community also shines in other ways. The book's excellent writing and organization make its insights easily accessible to readers. Strong background research on organizational funding and other issues complements Levine's ethnographic data. Moreover, the book's final chapter provides an unusually meticulous policy discussion that shows how some pitfalls of governance through CBOs could be avoided: funding a broader landscape of CBOs, covering their operating costs, and using other methods of democratic inclusion than community meetings would all go some way towards this.

One critical observation can also be added. *Constructing Community* convincingly shows that CBOs wield enormous power in urban development, but the book may understate the role of elected officials. In cities other than Boston, such as Chicago, politicians definitely do hold a lot of power over development, even if the funding comes from private foundations. Accordingly, politicians may play a marginal role in some cities but a larger one in others. Of course, this objection applies to virtually any theory in urban sociology, but Levine does not extensively discuss this issue.

Likewise, with regard to Levine's data on Boston, I sometimes wondered whether elected officials did not matter more than he suggests. For example, he discusses the case of the transit authority lowering fares for the Fairmount Line one week after all the candidates at a Boston mayoral forum expressed support for the idea (pp. 122–26). In a subsequent meeting with the Fairmount CBOs, the transit authority's general manager rejected the notion that the mayoral forum had influenced her decision. This may indicate the limited importance of elected officials, as Levine suggests, but of course the manager might also want to avoid the impression that she yields to political pressure.

Constructing Community is an important contribution to urban sociology and several overlapping fields as well, including organizational and political sociology. The book provides major insights into the changing structure of governance, development and democracy in American cities. Scholars working in these fields will definitely want to read this volume.

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