



Megacities and how to govern them: rethinking urban development in terms of infrastructure networks

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Are colossal megalopolises like Shanghai or Mumbai uncontrollable? This collective work shows that nothing could be further from the truth: by proposing an innovative interpretation, on the margins of classic approaches centred on political institutions, it underlines the importance of technical networks in city governments.

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Governing Megacities in Emerging Countries (*Métropoles XXL en pays émergents* in the original French) is an ambitious and stimulating book that seeks to shift the terms of the debate on how very large cities are governed. It represents the culmination of a research project led by Dominique Lorrain and conducted in partnership with the contributors of this collective work, the first stage of which was an issue of *Revue française d'administration* devoted to these questions in 2003.¹ The starting point for the project was a rejection of the traditional view of megacities in the Global South as chaotic, overpopulated and confronted with the challenge of hyper-poverty. Rather, this project sees these megacities – audaciously described “*métropoles XXL*” (“XXL metropolises”) in the original French – as new centres of capitalist accumulation and advances the hypothesis that they can go down paths of development (and emergence) quite distinct from those taken by cities in the Global North, not least because they do not had to deal with the same technological and social legacies.

Governing technical networks

To demonstrate their arguments, the authors make use of and interlink various perspectives and interpretations that have proved their fruitfulness with respect to advanced industrial cities, specifically with respect to the question of governance and technical (utility) networks. They put forward the following original hypothesis: despite the absence of any political or economic power that is explicitly in charge of managing them, these megacities “work” and are governed by means of agreements formulated to ensure the satisfactory operation of networks – essential tools for ensuring economic development. These networks constitute an example of second-rank institutions,

¹ Disclosure: I am currently involved in research for the “Chaire Ville” (academic chair devoted to the city and urban studies) of the École National des Ponts et Chaussées, the director of which is Dominique Lorrain. In parallel, I am also a participant in an ANR (French National Research Agency) research programme with Sylvie Jaglin and Marie-Hélène Zérah.

which Dominique Lorrain has, furthermore, theorised and which he references in his introduction. By dint of the regulations concerning, for example, the funding of their construction and operation, or the applicable operating standards, they do not only result from technical approaches but are also the subject of negotiations and adjustments that ultimately contribute towards urban government.

The debate is driven by four in-depth case studies, concerning Shanghai (Dominique Lorrain), Mumbai (Marie-Hélène Zérah), Cape Town (Alain Dubresson and Sylvie Jaglin) and Santiago de Chile (Géraldine Pflieger). These chapters are each just as different as the study sites in question, but they share the same sense of inquiry and the same references – particularly on the topics of urban governance and the role of institutions in development, from Clarence Stone (1989) to Douglas North (2005). They offer a comprehensive overview that extends from administrative organisation and local politics to infrastructure projects and the problem of housing. Transport issues are not absent, but are studied less extensively than the major utility networks such as water supply and sewage. All the authors have a long-standing familiarity with their subjects, which means that their contributions are, in and of themselves, extremely valuable summaries.

The conclusion, jointly written by Dominique Lorrain, Sylvie Jaglin and Alain Dubresson, compares and contrasts these empirical elements with exactitude and enthusiasm, and build towards a powerful generalisation by revealing a series of lessons. The first concerns the convergence of modes of governance, analysed from the standpoint of the methods of constructing and stabilising growth coalitions and action models used by stakeholders, such as “city improvement districts” in Cape Town or the principle showcased in Shanghai, where “the city pays for the city” by mobilising land sales to fund infrastructure. This then enables us to identify the divergences between top-down reforms, exemplified here by Cape Town, and a pragmatic learning approach, typified by Shanghai, with the ownership through experience and reformulation of tools offered by foreign partners (financial institutions and companies). The governability of cities appears to be related more to the interconnection and interplay of institutions than to the size of the city. Thus, for example, cities like Cape Town and Mumbai, marked by a “policy of enlargement” conducive to local competition, are harder to control than Shanghai or, to a lesser extent, Santiago, where the state still holds the highest authority of legitimacy. While, since the work of Saskia Sassen, it is widely accepted that informality should not be seen as a specificity – or, more bluntly, a specific defect – of cities of the South, the fact remains that its importance in land production is a comparatively burdensome problem faced by these cities.

For the authors, the political issue – the lack of control over these spaces – is more decisive than the social and economic segregation in this situation. Unlike the theories of Simon Marvin and Stephen Graham in *Splintering Urbanism* (2001), for whom the neoliberal reforms affecting the management of infrastructure networks are a major cause of social fragmentation, the authors underline the impact of mechanisms for accumulating land rent in landowner-dominated capitalism on the production of the intense socio-economic inequalities that affect megacities. Moreover, the term “neoliberalism” is barely present in this work and, given the diverse range of forms of urban transformation observed in the four cities, it seems clear that this paradigm has little explanatory value in the eyes of the authors, even if this point is not explicitly developed. The fact remains that reforms (whether labelled “neoliberal” or not), by adding new instruments and institutions without removing those that already exist, have contributed to an increase in the complexity of urban interplay.

A heuristic approach... that leaves power relations in the shadows

Overall, the hypothesis of invisible government via technical networks is heuristic and helps to identify modes of operation that are powerful and essential to economic emergence. Traditional approaches focused on political institutions too often leave these facts in the shadows. But this does not eliminate conflict and instability, and makes it difficult to imagine formulae for how to “correctly” control the city.

One of the book's key assets is undoubtedly its high level of analytical rigour and consistency in its approach and its writing. As such, it stands out as an important reference. However, singing the praises of the technical government of megacities in this way, not just as an entry point for research but also as a lever for action, also raises certain questions, as some of the book's conclusions make for somewhat uncomfortable reading. Its analysis of the case of Shanghai is stimulating and fills a void in the literature; China's economic capital stands out as a result of its trajectory compared to other megacities, such as Mumbai, that are doomed to suffer the ravages of poor development. In Shanghai, the networks function and residents are housed; however, this is achieved in a highly undemocratic context – perhaps, suggests the author, even thanks to its authoritarian form of management. Furthermore, in this text at least, the author does not dwell on the limits and contradictions of the model, namely the housing bubble that will eventually be stalled by the financial capacities of households, and environmental degradation. In the other cities studied, the authors' investigations place greater emphasis on the social movements that have developed around issues relating to amenities, the environment and urban policy, by highlighting the social contradictions between the visions of the middle classes and the needs of the poorest, especially in the case of Mumbai.

The general stance adopted by the authors of the book tie it to an approach marked by the regulationist or neo-institutionalist schools of thought, with the result that this work, through its style and its underlying assumptions, stands out from a whole section of critical literature, often published in English. The vision it proposes is based on an implicit hierarchy of forms of capitalism that is critical of local elites hungry for land revenue and more conciliatory towards urban-capitalist enterprises, while the global balance of economic power that ultimately determines tropisms of wealth is barely called into question. A more coordinated questioning of the links between the elites involved in these various economic sectors would have been welcome, in such a way as to connect local and global movements and challenge these modes of operations, presented as relatively disconnected. Similarly, it is regrettable that the book does not take into account the views of residents, in particular regarding their conceptions of spatial justice not just as a means of accessing infrastructure but also in terms of constructing a critical discourse on domination and calling for political inclusion.

Postcolonial urban studies?

The other question raised by this work is that of its scope and reach. By showing the existence and at least partial effectiveness of alternative modes of institutional organisation that rival those of cities in the Global North, the authors encourage a move away from overly “West-centric” urban studies. In this sense, this book is part of a form of “postcolonialisation” of urban studies, as proposed, for example, by Jennifer Robinson in her book *Ordinary Cities* (2006). And yet nothing could be less ordinary than these megacities, and it is precisely upon this specificity that the authors have built their reasoning. Does this not, therefore, run the risk of simply shifting the border between “developed” cities and those that are in the process of development, with the result of sidelining the analysis of cities excluded from these dynamics of emergence?

In these “excluded” cities, the operation of networks is often more chaotic and above all more diverse, forming what Sylvie Jaglin calls “composite ensembles” combining public services with various private – and often informal – initiatives that produce technically hybrid service offers that are almost impossible to coordinate, and where the major networks are far from able to serve the majority of the population (Jaglin 2012). In cities marked by violent political conflicts, for example, utility-network policies can prove to be a major vector of urban fragmentation – one has only to think of Baghdad, Gaza or Beirut (Verdeil 2008). In this way, the outlook on megacities proposed by this work, oriented by the analysis of the issues of emergence, tends to overlook this diversity and the political approaches that maintain it, whereas such diversity is clearly visible in the cities considered, particularly in the case of Mumbai. Furthermore, this infrastructural diversity is also set

to become an issue for the future – for example, the question of the post-network era (Coutard 2010; Petitot 2011).

Governing Megacities in Emerging Countries combines empirical density and critical intelligence. In addition to the results it proposes, its utility lies in a clear and stimulating framework of interpretation, combining analyses of urban materiality and of political mobilisations, both economic and social. Moreover, this is a framework that could pave the way for broader urban research, provided care is taken to avoid normativity when addressing the question of emergence.

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