

# BOOK REVIEW

## Place Matters: Metropolitix for the Twenty-First Century

reviewed by **Bill Pitkin**

Place Matters: Metropolitix for the Twenty-First Century  
Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom, eds.  
University Press of Kansas, Lawrence KS. 2001. 349 pp. ISBN 0700611347 (cloth).

Despite decades of attention from policy makers, researchers and community activists, the state of many cities in the US continues to be rather bleak. US cities contain deteriorating neighborhoods and face severe fiscal crises. They are home to millions of poor residents who lack access to gainful employment, good schools, safe and affordable housing, and financial and health services. Efforts to revitalize distressed urban areas have tended to be either *place-based*, seeking to improve the conditions in certain neighborhoods, or *people-based*, attempting to improve opportunities for poor residents. A place-based approach would include strategies to attract investment in housing and job creation to poor neighborhoods, while people-based strategies tend to focus on increasing the mobility of low-income residents to job opportunities that are most likely located in other areas of the city.

In this book by three prominent analysts of urban policy, Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom dispute the false dichotomy between place and people. For them, the conditions of poor residents and deteriorating urban neighborhoods are completely intertwined. Personal characteristics such as race, gender and educational level certainly impact the opportunities afforded to people, as demonstrated by research on how these factors impact differential access to such fundamental needs as jobs, higher education and access to credit. The contribution of this book, however, is that it convincingly asserts the role that place—namely, where we live—plays in these outcomes.

The first three chapters lay out an array of evidence—including data and vivid case studies—that demonstrates how US society is increasingly segregated by place. This segregation is economic in nature, as “economic

classes are becoming more spatially separate from each other, with the rich increasingly living with other rich people and the poor with other poor” (1). The US has the greatest income disparities of any industrialized nation, and for these authors the negative effects of this concentration of wealth is heightened by the fact that it is concentrated by place. Increasing economic segregation and urban sprawl over the past thirty years have generated economic and social costs for residents of both poor inner-city neighborhoods and wealthy suburbs.

The authors lay most of the blame for the economic segregation not on negative externalities of the free market, but rather squarely on the shoulders of the federal government. They blame federal transportation, housing and tax policies for encouraging suburban sprawl; they outline the failed history of federal urban policies from the post-war Urban Renewal program to the small-scale targeted revitalization programs of today. These past policies have created a fragmented environment in which fiscally distressed local governments are left to try to clean up the mess left by decades of increasing economic segregation.

The last three chapters of the book focus on possible strategies to deal with problems facing US cities. They begin, in “Regionalisms Old and New,” by tracing various experiments and strategies to provide regional solutions to the problems brought about by economic segregation. Coming to this with substantial background from the new regionalism literature (Pastor et al. 2001; Swanstrom 1996), the authors conclude that well-known cases of regional

cooperation such as Portland, Minneapolis-St. Paul and Jefferson County, Kentucky provide cautious optimism. There is increasingly broad support for regional approaches, but implementing them has been difficult due to local competition and political fragmentation. As one of the co-authors of *Regions that Work* has shown, new regionalist doctrines that promote cooperation between urban and suburban jurisdictions are impractical in a region such as Los Angeles (Pastor 2001). These authors likewise deny that regionalism will be a cure-all.

In the last two chapters, the authors more directly outline their unique approach to dealing with economic segregation, namely what they call a federal metropolitan policy agenda. This section of the book is probably the most controversial and open to critique, but also the most stimulating. Summarizing their rejoinders to a variety of possible critiques, the authors are sure to upset the Right and the Left, everyone from free-marketers, to economic and community development practitioners, and activists who see racial discrimination as the fundamental component of social inequality. They promote some pretty radical policy changes, such as reducing the home mortgage deduction on the personal income tax, and raising the federal minimum wage above the poverty level, but they also resort to some pretty benign, but vague, goals such as “linking community development to the regional economy” and “strengthening public schools.”

As often happens when reading through an ambitious laundry list of prescriptions to solve urban

problems, I ask myself, “how in the world can this be politically implemented?” Thankfully—and in contrast to many urban researchers who thrive at documenting problems but who are less adept at proposing solutions—the authors anticipated my anxiety. “The most potent criticism of our proposals is that they are politically impossible to achieve” (230). In the preface to the book, the authors foreshadow their prescription, contending that “the problems presently facing America’s cities are primarily political in nature” and “since their origin lies in politics, so does their solution” (xi). In the final chapter, they lay out a strategy to develop political coalitions to support a federal metropolitan agenda. The authors dispute the conventional wisdom that suburban voters, who outnumber urban voters by more than two to one in the US (see table 8.1 on page 238), are too conservative to back an increased federal role in dealing with urban problems. For evidence of this, they look to the Clinton-Gore ticket’s success in winning over suburban voters to the Democratic Party in 1992 and 1996. This leads them to argue essentially for redistricting and other strategies that will increase the influence of the Democratic Party both locally and in Congress. I found this section of their argument disappointing, as the authors seem to have forgotten their own admission that

Democrats have been nearly as neglectful of urban problems as Republicans. The solutions to economic segregation must go beyond partisan politics, and this kind of consensus is likely more difficult in the current environment in which homeland security dominates the political scene. While I applaud the authors for presenting a courageous political solution to the problems facing our cities, I would challenge them to outline a more pragmatic approach.

#### References

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