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Good governance and strong political will: Are they enough for transformation?

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ABSTRACT

By the year 2050, more than 70% of the world's population will be living in cities. The rush to the cities, along with subsequent increased consumption patterns, has dire consequences, for the ecological systems that sustain human life. Some find hope in the potential that cities can be built differently, that green infrastructure and denser forms of development will satisfy human needs while decreasing the stress on valuable resources and mitigating consequences of climate change. Some say that "strong political leadership and robust governance" is critical for this need to drive sustainable urban transitions. However, are "political will" and "good governance" enough or is the issue more complicated than this? Using a critical political economy approach this paper shows the fundamental difficulties that arise when attempting to transition urban centres to "smarter", more "sustainable" and "resilient" cities. Ultimately, the paper argues that "good governance" and "strong political will" are inadequate for understanding the requirements for transformation.

1. Introduction

Cities are expanding in an unsustainable manner. This is problematic for goals of maintaining environmental integrity and human well-being. UNESCO's World Biosphere Reserve programme is a network of areas that have committed to implementing land use strategies that encourage conservation or more environmentally supportive forms of development. Where one might expect decision-making to be more sensitive to environmental and social needs such as where lands are gazetted as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, in places with a long track record of democratic decision-making (Canada) and in places where a relatively new democratic government is intentionally aiming at social and environmental sustainability (South Africa), one sees instead a scramble for resources with mixed outcomes (see Watkins et al., 2003), many of which are suboptimal and founded on environmentally unsustainable land-use practices that privilege particular elements of society. Why is this so?

This paper aims to answer this question by examining two case study areas: (1) Jamestown, Western Cape, which is located within the Cape Winelands Biosphere Reserve, South Africa; and (2) the most southerly portion of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve, Ontario, Canada, commonly known as the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

These cases have been chosen because they are located in two very different countries socially, politically and economically, yet both have rural landscapes that experience pressure for development. Areas within Biosphere Reserves were chosen because it is assumed that if sustainable development and protection of greenspace can occur anywhere in the world, it should be within these areas because their stakeholders must demonstrate a commitment to the pillars of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme before obtaining the status. The overall intent of Biosphere Reserves is to promote sustainable development based on local community efforts and sound science (UNESCO, 2014).

The areas were also chosen because both Biosphere Reserves are close to rapidly expanding major international metropolitan areas (Cape Town, South Africa and Toronto, Canada). Accordingly, it is assumed that because of this, tension between protection and development should be much greater than if the Biosphere Reserves were located far from major urban centres. Examining the tension between the requirement to adhere to UNESCO Biosphere Reserve goals and pressure for development due to proximity of rapidly expanding metropolitans provides insight into the key factors that cause land to be developed or protected.

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2. Theory

This paper draws upon theories of governance, critical political economy, and resilience thinking to understand and interpret the results found in the case study areas. Governance centres on the allocation of scarce resources. A review of governance literature reveals that achieving equitable governance arrangements is not an easy task (Ansell and Gash, 2007). Multiple conflicts arise between and among the diverse groups of actors and stakeholders involved in processes. The literature cautions that state powers often monopolize process and may simply "do what they want" so that a project will meet their set goals, regardless of what occurred in the process (Reddel and Woolcock, 2004).

"The shift to governance signifies a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed" (Rhodes, 1996, p. 3). This has occurred in response to the inability of traditional forms of linear government processes to resolve increasingly complex social and environmental issues. Governance theory helps in analyzing the various networks of interacting actors in a new light (Newman et al., 2004; Rhodes, 1996). While there are many definitions of governance, that put forth by Olsson et al. (2008, p. 2490) is especially useful:

> [T]he interacting patterns of actors with conflicting objectives and the instruments chosen to steer social and environmental processes within a particular policy area···Institutions are a central component as are interactions between actors and the multilevel institutional setting, creating complex relationships between people and ecosystem dynamics.

The governance concept, therefore, recognizes that decision-making processes are far from linear and involve civil society, government and the private sector all playing roles in deciding outcomes. However, much of the governance literature, particularly policy-oriented approaches reflecting on the means of achieving 'good governance', takes on a mechanistic character (WWDR II, 2006; World Bank, 1997; World Bank, 2013). Yet, rare are the cases where good governance – defined as equitable, sustainable, and efficient resource use – is realized in practice. More often than not, outcomes are suboptimal, often giving rise to social movements and renewed social struggle (Griffin, 2013). Critical political economy helps us understand the dynamics underpinning such outcomes. Robert Cox's approach (1987), for example, maps out what he calls the 'constellation of social forces' in a society, to see where power lies, in what forms, when and why. These 'constellations of social forces' change over time, and are situated in the prevailing ideas of a particular period in time, such as neoliberalism. Cox drew from Gramsci's state theory where he referred to historic blocs – dominant connections between ideologies, material capabilities, and institutions – as critical to understanding the emergence of particular state forms (Moolakkattu, 2009). The constellations of social forces refer to the relationship between three categories of forces (which Cox also refers to as potentials) that interact within a structure. These include material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. Put more simply, we can regard each as the basis and locus of power.

What is important to note here are two things: (1) power has many bases and forms; and (2) given the dynamic relationship among the three elements, changes in one "potential" will impact the others and can, in certain circumstance, completely alter the constellation of social forces. It is for this reason that understanding the contemporary setting in relation to its broader historical context is so important for understanding why things are the way they are and what are the "potentials" for transformation.[1]

Complex systems and resilience thinking encourages one to look at the multiple layers that influence change within a system in light of surprise (Walker and Salt, 2006; Davidson et al., 2013). The resilient term itself has gained considerable attention in the last number of years. It is important to note, however, that "resilience" does not automatically imply a "desirable" system (depending on your perspective). The system driving urban sprawl, for instance, is very resilient but what we really need to do is interrupt the resilience of that system and create a different kind of resilience in cities that is more conducive to environmental integrity and social justice.

According to resilience thinking, change is mediated by a wide variety of interconnected components and it is the combinations and interactions of these components that result in activity that may not be recognizable when viewing only an individual part (Folke et al., 2010; Taylor, 2004). Resilience concepts emerged from Holling (2001), who based his findings on ecological studies and claimed that complexity of living systems does not form randomly but from a large number of interacting self-organized factors (also, Gunderson and Holling, 2002). In his 1973 article, *Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems,* Holling pointed out that up until then, ecological theoretical models failed to incorporate "realistic behaviour of processes [that] involved, randomness, spatial heterogeneity, and an inadequate number of dimensions of state variables" (1973, p. 6). Holling proposed that the behaviour of ecological systems could be defined by two distinct properties: resilience and stability. He wrote: "resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of a system to return to an equilibrium state after a temporary disturbance. The more rapidly it returns, and with the least fluctuation, the more stable it is. . .stability is the property of the system and the degree of fluctuation around specific states that result" (1973, p. 17).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing classic triangulation methods of data collection and analysis. It utilises a comparative case study approach (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Yin (1993, p. 47) explains that "multiple case studies can be used to either (a) predict similar results (a linear replication) or (b) predict contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)".

The paper is based on nearly 100 interviews located in both Canada and South Africa, conducted between 2011 and 2013. In both cases, I attempted to obtain a precise geographical area within each Biosphere Reserve to study, and began the snowball sampling technique, a process in which individuals were asked to identify other individuals with whom it would be suitable for me to speak. Potential interviewees were also identified because they were mentioned during interview processes. This technique continued throughout the duration of field study.

The interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. The results of each case study were presented in a number of public venues. This included conferences, research seminars where the study participants were invited to attend, and informal

[1] According to Cox (1981: 100), power plays out in relation to three 'dominant and emergent rival structures': "(1) organization of production, more particularly with regard to the *social forces* engendered by the production process; (2) *forms of state* as derived from a study of state/society complexes; and (3) *world orders*, that is the particular configuration of forces which successively define the problematic of war or peace for the ensemble of states".

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