COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF POLITICAL AGENDAS

Identifying Models of National Urban Agendas

A View to the Global Transition

Edited by
Francesca Gelli · Matteo Basso

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PART I

The "Old" Geography: Between Continuity and Change

The cases presented in this part—which focuses on urban agendas of France, the UK, the People's Republic of China and the US—introduce a geography of national urban agendas that can be traced back to the second half of the twentieth century, right after the Second World War.[1] The contexts analysed herein, despite their respective constitutional, economic, ideological and political differences, highlight innovative formulations of explicit national urban programmes, aimed at implementing priorities and objectives of the country's political agenda.

The above-mentioned countries have different urbanization patterns and levels. France, the UK and the US are currently amongst the most urbanized countries in the world in terms of population living in urban areas, as recorded by their respective national statistics. Accordingly, the rate in France is at almost 80%, whereas in the UK and the US it is about 89% and 83%, respectively. China, on the contrary, shows a much lower urbanization level (64% in 2021, according to the China's latest Statistical Yearbook). However, compared to the European and North American context, China's urbanization rates have undergone a phase of massive growth over a much shorter time, that is, less than three decades. According to UN-Habitat, China, together with India and Nigeria, will host in the

[1] The selection is not exhaustive: future research could also include the robust Dutch historical tradition of national urban policies and, to some extent, the Australian government's experience in the same domain.

near future one-third of the global urban population growth. Despite these differences, the countries featured in this part highlight long-term trajectories of national urban agendas with national governments playing an active role in launching urban policy programmes.

In our analytical timeframe, the to-and-fro pendulum in national urban policy reveals dynamics of "punctuated equilibrium" (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Periods of greater political commitment to national urban issues alternated with phases of mild interest in public action, as well as disillusionment with public urban policies and the central government's direct intervention. As reaction, a shift towards more market-oriented initiatives and decentralized governance was set in motion.

The ensemble of selected cases outlines the backbone of models of urban agendas that, to varying degrees, have become reference for policy design practices in countries worldwide, throughout the twentieth century to the present day. To date, these cases still constitute a milestone in policy studies literature.

Between the 1950s and 1990s, governmental policymaking and public policy tools have evolved with common traits in the UK, the US and France, to address the many challenges of urbanization processes. Specific trajectories of intervention strategies are highly correlated to local contexts.

In a first phase, urban policies—especially place-based programmes for impoverished urban areas and renewal programmes to combat urban blight (1940–1970)—incorporated *community development* ideas grounded on comprehensive planning and expert problem-solving. Aimed at ameliorating the residents' living conditions in distressed neighbourhoods, approaches to urban policy design were characterized by solutions *for the local*. They incorporated specific theories on poverty, marginality, deviance, and social change which inhibited local participation and activation of people's resources for change. Community became the object of planning for the greater general interest. Recalling Charles Lindblom's thesis in *Politics and Markets*, the community development perspective—applied to urban diagnosis for *correct* interventions and policy decisions—was coherent with the model of the *intellectually guided society*. The model "specified that some people in the society are wise and informed enough to ameliorate its problems and guide social change with a high degree of success […]. Since it is knowledge rather than volition that guides society, the intellectual elite is simultaneously a political elite" (Lindblom 1977, p. 249). The same model involves a dichotomy between rulers and the ruled, which can be clearly observed in "the economic planning of

the communist variety", as the China case study highlights. The three case studies related to Western Europe and the US thematize the failures of programme initiatives guided by community development ideals to achieve objectives of change. They also highlight additional problems and unexpected outcomes which include a worsening of social and economic disparities, the exacerbation of racial discrimination and urban disorders.

A meaningful description of "wicked problems" is made by Theodore Lowi in the *End of Liberalism* (1969) within a dedicated chapter on *Cities: The American Tragedy*. Therein he argued that a cause of city decline and general fiscal crisis was the governmental structure and policy that, driven by liberal ideology, had rapidly lost its ability to deal with modern social policies. Moreover, *the old shame and new* was the recurrent fear and hatred towards new incoming ethnic and racial groups and lower classes, which stimulated the escape of the medium and high classes from the city, triggering suburbanization dynamics.

In the 1960s, a shift towards the adoption of a *community involvement* approach in urban programme design brought significant changes in policy urban regeneration and redevelopment tools, giving rise to a new season of more participatory urban policies. Such reforming ideas encouraged the involvement of local communities—citizens, *above all the have nots*, as well as local governments—strengthening proximity relationships and the nexus between people and places. Urban interventions were planned in tandem *with the city*, in policies *of the local*, thus emphasizing the demand for inclusive decision-making processes. From a citizen's perspective, participation was related *to power* and change of the *status quo*, while, from the government's perspective, participation was oriented *to advise*, to enhance local people's knowledge and competencies on dealing with local problems. The politicity of planning practices lay in the interaction, as a method of defining problems and increasing choice options. Public-private partnership was a practical tool to enhance effective multi-stakeholder involvement in urban project design, and joint action in implementing steps. But also inter-governmental and inter-agency collaboration had a new impetus to overcome the fragmentation of public intervention and improve institutional coordination. Participation was seen as a tool to develop more integrated urban policies. Community involvement was actually a step towards the adoption of a governance approach, developing economic and social dimensions of urban policies.

Community involvement revealed difficulties in developing processes of effective participation—inclusive, open and accountable. Moreover, it

showed its weaker side in the difficulty it encountered in giving continuity to the outcomes of participatory processes. In many contexts, it turned out to be a sporadic and inconsistent effort. In the 1990s, *community-building* approaches were introduced in urban policies with the aim of empowering local people and local governments, to strengthen their autonomous capabilities. Local communities were regarded as protagonists of urban project design and implementation, encouraging collaborative relations with public institutions. Planning was conceived within and throughout the community. The potential social capital of localities—networks, informal individual and collective relationships, and other social assets—was regarded, in urban policy, as an effective resource for design and implementation purposes.

Going back to the contributions that make up this first part, Deborah Galimberti and Gilles Pinson discuss the French case by presenting, in a diachronic perspective that starts from the second post-war reconstruction, the evolution of the country's national urban policy. Accordingly, the authors present three sets of policies that can arguably be considered part of an urban agenda: urban planning policies, regional development policies and urban constituent policies. Their analysis traces the changes that occurred in the power relations between urban governments and the central state, challenging in this way the idea of a highly centralized country that is widespread within international public debates. By focusing specifically on the issue of urban regeneration, Paola Briata and Mike Raco examine the historical evolution of the UK's urban policy, starting from the 1960s. The authors thus highlight phases of continuity and discontinuity triggered by periodic changes that not only reflect broader political orientations but also ways of framing cities and places. Matteo Basso and Law Wang explore China's case, a country where a national urban agenda, embodied in specific Five-Years Socio-Economic Development Plans, is in force since 1953. Transition from a centrally planned to a market economy triggered by the economic reforms was launched in the late seventies. Such transition called for a shift in the role and function of cities in Chinese politics, society, culture and economy. Currently, it is still ongoing, supported by the recent launch of a New-Type Urbanization Plan. Finally, Francesca Gelli examines the evolution of the American national urban agenda from a policy analysis perspective. In the past, American urban policy programmes and governance were a reference model in urban policy studies, acknowledged worldwide. The US urban agenda has also been a source of policy transfer for policy design, owing to innovations in

legislation, policy tools, methods of intervention and experiments of federal aid policy programmes to cities with a very consistent budget and intervention scale.

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