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## **Critical perspectives on contemporary urban agendas in Europe: geographies, discourses, and planning tools**

### **BOOK REVIEW**

**Foregrounding Urban Agendas. The New Urban Issue in European Experiences of Policy-Making**, edited by S. Armondi and S. De Gregorio Hurtado, Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020, x + 316 pp., £ 131,27 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-030-29072-6

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How does the dominant Urban Age ideology translate into policies and projects? Who has been setting or influencing Urban Agendas (UAs) in Europe in the last decade? Which spatiality relates to the widespread implementation of UAs and what happens to the territories “left behind” by urban-centred developments?

These are some of the main questions addressed by Simonetta Armondi and Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado’s book, *Foregrounding Urban Agendas. The New Urban Issue in European Experiences of Policy-Making*, an edited volume with contributions by more than 20 authors from all over Europe. The book has its roots in a complex and multifaceted theoretical debate, spanning from “new regionalism” to contemporary Marxist geography and border studies, and is enriched by a variety of case studies, showing significant differences in terms of power, geographies, practices and discourses around UA setting in Europe.

The editors of the book challenge the prevailing Urban Age ideology based on the questionable assumption that economic growth in the main urban hubs of Europe would bring diffused benefits to larger territories in terms of occupation, sustainability, liveability, mobility, security and vibrancy. Going back to some of the pillars of the literature on political agenda setting, Armondi and De Gregorio Hurtado define UA setting as a process characterised by winning and losing issues (and spaces) in relation to policy elite attention. In order to demonstrate such assumption, the editors propose a conceptual framework which allows the various authors to provide thick descriptions of the different cases, by answering questions on how are UAs constructed, how do stakeholders, interest groups and citizens influence UAs, what is on the agenda and what is the UA status in the various contexts. Through the analysis of the cases, the book shows how some policy issues end up being preferred over others thanks to powerful legitimisation narratives, supported by strong alliances among different actors engaged at multiple scales.

The book is structured in four parts, reflecting different geographies and perspectives on UAs. The initial section on Multiscalar agendas at the national and supranational level is opened by a critical description of the role of the European Union in privileging the allocation of funds to urban areas since the early 1990s. The chapter collects a long series of EU documents contributing to the definition of a EU urban archetype, from *Towards an Urban Agenda for the European Union* (1997) up until the CITIES Forum (2014), highlighting how the relation between EU and the European cities changed after the introduction of the Pact of Amsterdam (2016), which defined the

Urban Agenda for the EU. The relation between the EU government and the national governments, as well as the role of multi-level governance in the UA setting is explored in the chapters on Spain, Portugal and Latvia also included in the first section. Region-making and metropolitan areas in multilevel agendas is the topic of the second part of the book, in which political legitimacy issues and conflicts among different government levels are exemplified through the analysis of three case studies located in Scotland, Poland and in the areas of Greater Copenhagen (between Denmark and Sweden) and Berlin-Brandenburg in Germany. This section highlights also conflicting territorialities targeted by UA related policies and more traditional state promoted initiatives, as well as increasing territorial inequalities as a result of such conflicts. The third part of the book focuses on Metropolitan and city region agendas, analysing the relevance of urban and metropolitan issues in Germany, Finland, England and France. In this section, the authors pay attention in particular to issues of state rescaling and to the emergence and effectiveness of new administrative actors such as the metropolitan governments in the last decades. The last part of the book promotes a reflection on Regional and urban agendas between policy and planning, through the cases of UA for Andalusia, Madrid 2030 and the “implicit” UA in Milan, Italy. In this section, the authors consider how not only planning bodies but also planning tools have been rescaling as a result of the introduction of UAs. The book is concluded by a reflection by the editors based on the main outcomes of the different chapters, in which they highlight the porousness of the borders between cities, regions and further territorial scales, considered in their spatial and temporal mutability. Moreover, the editors point out how the introduction of UAs, despite being marketed as a profound innovation, suffers in many cases from path dependency, which reproduces and sometimes reinforces existing territorial inequalities and power relations.

The book is thus a timely contribution to the current debates on spatial imbalances in Europe, which have been exacerbating after the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The sanitary emergence has been showing the contradictions of the Urban Age ideology, the fragility of cities hit by the contagion and the interconnectivity between different territories crossed by constant flows, which have been suddenly stopping for some weeks in parts of Europe. Due to this shocking event, decision makers at multiple territorial levels, as well as powerful stakeholders have been reconsidering (often with distinct neo-colonial approaches) those territories that have been left behind for long times. On the other hand, national policies aimed at fostering inner peripheries through the use of structural funds (e.g. National Strategy for Inner Areas in Italy) have been gaining momentum as far-sighted policies in a time of (urban) uncertainty. The book edited by Armondi and De Gregorio Hurtado will therefore be of interest to planning scholars and practitioners currently struggling against uneven forms of territorial development, as well as to those who are wishing to understand the complexity of multilevel governance and the deep political dimensions of agenda setting, especially in a time of urban crisis.