City, Public Value, and Capitalism

New Urban Visions and Public Strategies

Edited by Hiroyuki Mori, Tomohiko Yoshida, and Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko

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Smart and Sustainable? Capitalism and City Futures in the Age of Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

*"Technocratic systems and policy design logics emerge from social and value-laden settings; neither materializes from a mythical purity of logic but is fashioned in politically and epistemically contested environments." (*Hartley, 2020, p. 237*).*

Because a city is inseparable from its economic context, its analysis must be positioned in relation to the current and future forms of capitalism

that define it. Examining the commonly deployed "sustainable" and "smart" narratives of city visioning, this chapter argues that the seemingly revolutionary tone of such narratives belies the fact that they represent no meaningful departure from capitalist logic and are thus likely to perpetuate existing policy problems. Market fundamentalism, even when obscured or blunted by these seemingly progressive narratives, replicates existing power structures while making the by-products and failures of status-quo capitalism politically palatable—even in the face of growing economic inequality and existential threats like climate change, pandemics, and human exploitation.

The term "sustainable" is often conceived in a broad sense, encompassing not only environment and energy but also softer factors like social inclusion and disaster resilience. The term "smart" is also becoming similarly broad and vague, moving beyond its original focus on technology to encompass the way governments claim to conceptualize and approach policy problems. Emerging narratives around the future of cities suggest that these concepts are related and play similar roles as discursive frames. For example, the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework combines both in its vision for inclusive urban growth: "a smart city is also equivalent to a 'smart sustainable city', promoting economic and social development alongside environmental protection through effective mechanisms to meet the current and future challenges of its people, while leaving no one behind" (MFA, 2018).

The current language around both concepts appears to signify a shift in narrative focus from growth and capital accumulation to social equity and wellbeing. This shift leverages a variety of emergent ideas and properties such as the creation of new "public values" in policy practice. However, despite efforts to reframe legacy concepts (ostensibly for political purposes), there exists an underlying capitalist logic that reflects a longstanding faith in the primacy of the market, including the idea that market efficiency can deliver economic growth and the public goods needed to achieve loftier goals like social inclusion. This chapter's critical provocation is that the concepts of "sustainable," "smart," and their variants are imbued with a capitalist logic that reproduces itself even amidst a profound loss of credibility borne of anomalous data (Kuhn, 2012 [1962]) and increasingly wicked and intractable crises (Head, 2019).

One example of capitalist logic in policy action is the corporate power that informs discourses around sustainability and smartness. The innovative capacity of the private sector enjoys an increasing degree of credibility in producing market-based solutions to policy problems. For example, pilot projects like Sidewalk Toronto promote a totalizing technocratic vision that goes beyond the once specific and ring-fenced parameters of discrete smart cities technologies. This "city in a box" approach, valorized in utopian claims about smartness, masquerades as an integrated solution to urban problems while, at its core, advancing private development interests; more colloquially, the smart city idiom can be seen as a land grab. Sustainable and smart may thus be used by corporate actors as branding schemes for projects that rely on the privatization and financialization of public space. In this way, the logic of capitalism has been embedded in narrative-based policy revisioning from its inception, enjoying the credibility of "common-sense" efficiency but perpetuating pathologies that work against the notion of public goods.

Given these limitations, how can the scholarly discussion about sustainability and smartness be reshaped? There is a need for more critical approaches such as those taken by Datta and Odendaal (2019) and Kuecker and Hartley (2020), not only within the academy but also in practitioner circles. At the same time, efforts to redefine and reshape these narratives are already occurring on multiple fronts, including political critiques of the neoliberal and market-fundamentalist logic underlying the sustainability and smart movements. Adding further nuance to these critiques, this chapter goes beyond arguments about the corporate capture of policy agendas to discuss how narratives themselves become institutionally embedded. This discussion seeks to deepen understandings about the mechanics by which particular narratives maintain their hegemonic position within a broader policy discourse—one that shrewdly presents itself as progressive, adaptable, and politically responsive even as its claims are undermined by inconvenient realities. This chapter further argues that the perpetuation of staid capitalist logic within these seemingly revolutionary policy narratives reflects, in part, the underlying influence of policy-instrumental rationalism—the view that complex problems can be reduced to observable elements and solved with policy interventions

that are appropriately targeted, designed, and calibrated (Hartley & Kuecker, 2021). The remainder of this chapter discusses the institutionalization of governance reform narratives and how the promotion of sustainable and smart as reconstituted iterations of "good governance" serves capitalist ideals.

DOUBLING DOWN: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF GOVERNANCE NARRATIVES

When exploring how narratives like sustainable and smart have become institutionalized in global policy discourse, it is helpful to consider the historical evolution of public administrative practice and the effect of political realities on how good governance is conceived of at any given time. The concept of a politics-administration divide, mainstreamed into policy scholarship over a century ago, gave rise to professionalization and managerialization in the public sector and thus created space for the emergence of efficiency and optimization as governance virtues. The promotion of an instrumental-rationalist policy epistemic and its expression in the good governance narrative enjoyed substantial institutional backing in the post-WWII Bretton Woods era (Anders, 2005; Stiglitz, 2000). Amidst the fallout of the war, countries were eager to establish a global economic system that would ensure practical interdependence and thereby forestall geopolitical instability. While some of the principles on which the Bretton Woods system was based, including the backing of the United States dollar with gold, have since been abandoned, the ideas and institutions (including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) that emerged from that formative era endure today and remain highly influential in how the global economic system and associated policy efforts operate. The evolution of these ideas and their influence on governance practice since WWII illustrates how narratives like sustainability and smartness protect a long-running ideological commitment to capitalism that adapts to circumstantial imperatives while maintaining epistemic coherence.

In the wake of WWII, fiscal commitments and development aid were mobilized to assist rebuilding efforts, while in the United States the wartime production apparatus was reconfigured for peacetime. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of high economic growth across the Western world and elsewhere, supporting substantial tax-funded public investment in development projects (e.g., poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and research capacity; see Eisinger, 1988 and Devine, 1985). However, this well-resourced machine of government intervention and its deepening relationship with the private sector encountered turbulence amidst a confluence of factors. Emerging in the late 1960s, these factors included economic challenges (e.g., oil price fluctuations) and, primarily in some Western countries (where many scholarly ideas about governance were originating), socio-political contention arising from unresolved racial injustices. The post-war Anglo (American, British, and Commonwealth) model of government intervention faced substantial political pushback as fiscal and social crises arose and the legitimacy of government institutions was challenged. From this backlash and the accompanying crisis of trust in institutions (Dalton, 2005) emerged criticisms about the size and role of government.

These critiques were accompanied by seismic shifts in normative views about the public sector, with the concept of New Public Management (NPM) emerging as a prescriptive vision for reform. The NPM era saw substantial reforms in governance (Christensen & Lægreid, 1999; Hood, 1995), enabled by a global institutional architecture that embraced the capitalist principles of privatization and marketization in the same way that the principles of systemic economic interconnectedness arising from the Bretton Woods agreements had been embraced decades prior. Gaining pace in the UK, New Zealand, and the United States, among other countries, NPM reforms had the advertised effect of fiscally disciplining government interventions.

Despite the advertised virtues of NPM, critics argued that the adoption of associated reforms had the effect of "gutting" or "hollowing-out" state capacity (Clifton, 2014; Christensen & Lægreid, 2002)—particularly with respect to programs like social support, education, and infrastructure. While such reforms, in various manifestations across

countries, continue to be promoted decades later in political discourses about government waste and inefficiency, many scholars and practitioners have pushed for the reassertion of the state in public affairs. For example, scholarship has proposed so-called 'post-NPM' models (Christensen, 2012) including new public governance (Osborne, 2006) and new public service (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015); these alternatives underscore the role of the state while recognizing the value of multi-sectoral models for public service delivery. If the ideological pendulum had swung towards government intervention in the post-WWII era, and towards a pro-market model in the NPM era, the post-NPM pendulum settled somewhere in the middle—recognizing capacities not only in the public and private sectors but also in the "third sector" (e.g., community groups and non-government organizations).

Considering the state of NPM and post-NPM in the third decade of the 21st century, ideas about government appear to be shaped increasingly by manifold and convergent systemic crises including climate change (which gained mainstream policy recognition only in the past two decades), threats to national and personal safety and security with both local and global dimensions, the fragility of the global economic system (as illustrated by the 2008 global financial crisis), and the COVID-19 pandemic. These crises highlighted global economic, political, and social interconnectedness and the influence of geopolitics on efforts to address systemic crises (Watson et al., 2020). Responses included global policy initiatives and frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), New Urban Agenda, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Paris Agreement, and Sendai Framework. Amidst these crises, however, there remains no consensus about the efficacy of NPM versus that of post-NPM, and neither "camp" appears to have conclusively captured the political or policy discourse.

Each of these political-ideological movements claims to have an exclusive claim to good governance, illustrating how the concept can be an empty signifier while still serving as a flexible and adaptable political tool. The contents of the concept—however non-substantive they may be—have been robustly explored and need no review here; the dynamics by which good governance deepens its influence invite novel critical reflection. The conduits for spreading ideas about good

governance, as previously mentioned, include the global institutional constellation of aid organizations and the numerous governance indices that have proliferated since the early 2000s (Erkkilä, 2016; Gisselquist, 2014). At the same time, it is pertinent to consider how narratives like good governance continue to find new pathways for influence and what these processes reveal about power dynamics and the political economy of sustainability and smartness.

Good governance is a concept that was not promoted simply through institutional coercion (e.g., tied or conditional aid; see Svensson, 2003) but through the implicit consensus of a narrative built around plausible if nebulous ideas that ultimately became seen as common-sense government. This narrative ossification can be observed not only in the concept of good governance but also in other largely unassailable concepts like capitalism and democracy. For all their virtues and faults, these concepts are practically incapable of being criticized or rethought at the mainstream level—least of all in politically or economically liberal (free) settings—and the consequent narrative hegemony bounds how society re-thinks legacy ideas and incorporates alternative ones. Colloquially, the house can be torn down only with the tools used to assemble it; alternative epistemics and understandings have no terminological analogue with the dominant paradigm, and they are thus so mismatched with reality that they are dismissed as effete and irrelevant. An example is how so-called "alternative knowledges" (e.g., folk, local, or indigenous understandings about society and "nature") are marginalized by the heavily technocratic view of climate change resilience, as illustrated by the SDG project and its hundreds of progress indicators (Hartley, 2020; Kuecker, 2018).

New trends in global governance harbor the legacy of this hegemonic thinking, branching in various disciplinary directions while carrying a common underlying (capitalist) theme. For example, the global urban collaboration movement stresses knowledge exchange among cities, with networks addressing domain-specific policy issues like urban sustainability, migration, technological "modernization," and governance practice (Kosovac et al., 2021; Leitner et al., 2018; Acuto et al., 2017). This network model has a deep history originating with city "twinning" and city diplomacy (Acuto et al., 2021), and this strategy has

matured in both theory and practice to the extent that it now stands as a powerful policymaking template connecting global and local governance (including, for example, SDG "localization;" Hartley, 2020). Members of such networks in the formative epoch were cities that had the resources to participate—what the literature and casual understandings now consider "global" cities. These cities are seen to be policy leaders on issues like urban sustainability and socio-political issues; examples are New York City, London, Los Angeles, Paris, Singapore, and other "Alpha" world cities (as classified by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network). At the same time, the opportunity to participate in networks has been extended to cities that enjoy less global visibility, including smaller cities in wealthy countries and "megacities" in lower-income countries. The latter may seek opportunities for knowledge exchange to address policy issues relevant to their context, including rapid urbanization, informal housing, forced migration, and threats to the built and natural environments resulting from climate change. The global urban network model also represents an opportunity for urban governments to circumvent political pushback at the national government level and pursue policy visions that they consider appropriate for their own localities.

Despite the apparent advantages of such networks as venues for the exchange of good governance ideas, it is appropriate to apply a critical perspective when examining the underlying power dynamics of collaboration and knowledge transfer—including market fundamentalism's influence on how policy problems are defined and addressed. While such networks can provide useful conduits for the seemingly innocuous practice of policy transfer, diffusion, and learning (for discussions of these concepts, see Hadjiisky et al., [2017], Marsh and Sharman [2009], Stone [2001], and Dolowitz & Marsh [2000]), they can also serve as institutional mechanisms for framing and promoting particular narratives and thereby generate the coercive effect of normalizing policies across member cities. As such, it is prudent to consider how seemingly novel institutional arrangements like global urban networks can in some ways reflect the same power dynamics that the Bretton Woods institutions did in promoting post-war global economic integration. In the case of urban networks, a narrative about "good urban governance" congeals around the concept of sustainability,

smartness, and other policy issues prioritized by the SDGs; the ideals of the incumbent global policy project are thus institutionalized in the urban agenda from inception (as opposed to being identified and addressed endogenously according to circumstantial or contextual need). SDG localization is becoming more deeply institutionalized through progress indicators like the "SDG tracker" and through the embrace of voluntary local reviews (VLRs; see Oosterhof, 2018). When interpreted as a socio-political system, the global narrative on sustainability is—as it would be for almost any policy issue—buttressed by the power of self-imposed conformity resembling Foucault's governmentality: the pressure felt by city network members to comply with apparent consensus or mainstream narratives.

The prospects and risks of narrative hegemony are apparent in an era when governments of all scales must confront the local impacts of global crises. Cases of "economic miracles" like the so-called Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) evince the crucial role of the state in providing infrastructure and facilitating coordination in ways that catalyze structural economic transformation. Pro-market and anti-state narratives appear to ignore this history but nevertheless enjoy deep embeddedness in the underlying logic of good governance as measured by the most common global indices. Countries whose governance systems reflect some compromise between pro-market and pro-state extremes are less legible to the common metrics of good governance; indeed, these systems may be seen as messy and "prismatic" (Riggs, 1964) hybrids that, absent conformity to known models, appear to survive by sheer force of political and administrative will—or by dumb luck. The absolutist discourse of market fundamentalism holds little of the nuance needed to understand such situations. In the policy sciences literature, this disfunction has been metaphorized various ways and resembles an inherently disordered system that maintains coherence and effectiveness despite rationalist expectations to the contrary (Hartley and Howlett, 2021). These dynamics are crucial for understanding how capitalist logic lurks even in seemingly novel policy movements like sustainability and smartness. The final section of this chapter presents a more detailed discussion about how sustainability and smartness have been metricized and their

governance managerialized—trends reflecting the aforementioned phenomenon of narrative hegemony.

METRICIZING URBAN GOVERNANCE: THE SUSTAINABILITY AND SMARTNESS PERSPECTIVES

The pursuit of the SDGs has become managerialized through the introduction of over 200 indicators that practicalize the 17 goals. This effort enforces a type of soft accountability upheld through performance measurement, particularly as indicator data is used to compare and rank progress. The institutionalization of indicators in the SDG progress evaluation system also serves as a normalizing mechanism that directs the attention of governments towards a common set of problem conceptualizations and policy interventions. Further, policy efforts to pursue the SDGs are no longer the domain only of national governments; cities are increasingly using the SDGs as a guiding vision for their urban plans. Such localization efforts, often publicized through VLRs, can range from general references about the SDGs at one end of the spectrum to specific incorporation of monitoring targets at the other. A universal and standardized SDG localization monitoring strategy like that which exists for national-level governments could facilitate comparison and nudge city governments towards integrated adoption of all SDGs. Nevertheless, there are practical constraints to widespread adoption, such as limited resources, political pushback, and bureaucratic concerns about centralized control. Furthermore, the unique contexts of individual cities call for the flexible interpretation of SDG strategies around a variety of disparate conditions and capabilities. Indeed, the term "localization" itself implies a degree of context-based adjustment that focuses on the needs of smaller-scale jurisdictions.

One example of a progress monitoring initiative is the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) online registry, meant to be a platform for sharing good practices, success stories, and lessons learned regarding SDG implementation at the national and local levels. The program is supported by a database of over 400 cases and has a target

audience that includes member states and stakeholders. The searchable resource contains cases from around the world focused on the local scale and addressing all SDGs. Examples are social and affordable housing in Bahrain (addressing the SDG for sustainable cities and communities), implementing the Sendai Framework at the local level in European Union countries (SDGs focusing on poverty, climate action, and life below water), institutionalizing community participation in urban service delivery through "design, digital, and dialogue" in Helsinki (SDGs for sustainable communities and peace, justice, and strong institutions), organic farming in a Turkish village (SDGs for gender equality, responsible consumption and production, and life on land), and New York City's VLR (all SDGs). Examples of sharing initiatives are the "tools" and "discuss and engage" functions of the "Localizing the SDGs" platform, a joint effort by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat), and the UN Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments.

Regarding the institutionalized sharing of best practices, New York City's "Global Vision | Urban Action" program, managed through the Mayor's Office for International Affairs, is implemented through site visits, panel discussions, and UN events to highlight lessons about SDG localization. It also embraces the VLR process as an opportunity to align urban policies with SDGs and communicate progress in a language meaningful to city governments embarking on similar efforts. According to a Brookings Institution report, "integrating the SDGs into the city-to-city networks in which they participate will, by sharing best practices and innovations, help to leverage needed capabilities. It will also provide a platform for elevating their voice in debates about the SDGs" (Pipa, 2019). In this way, SDG localization is seen as another opportunity to deepen coordination and knowledge-sharing, further embedding (or privileging) the perspectives and experiences of "leader" cities and producing a normalizing effect on the naming and framing of policy issues. Evidence indicates, however, that the topical focus (as largely aligned with individual SDGs) of urban networks varies. For example, a study by Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009) finds that, among Asian cities participating in such networks, urban leaders felt that issues pertaining to environment, health, education, and infrastructure were

more applicable to urban policy than were issues pertaining to gender empowerment, poverty, housing, finance, and economic development.

The power of narrative in establishing a global policy agenda with local implications can be seen not only in the sustainability project but also in the smartness project. In an era when technology is permeating nearly every facet of society, including governance, the commercial interests and agendas of corporate actors are making an increasingly consequential footprint in daily life and state-society relations. Developers of smart city technologies, as profit-driven actors at their core, increasingly must balance commercial motives with softer narratives about public value, sustainability, and city futures. In this way, they have a substantial role in determining the urban policy agenda. From a more abstract perspective, urban policy as a technocratic exercise remains beholden to a capitalist logic that has in many ways been the cause of urban policy problems like socio-economic inequality and climate change. Indeed, technological solutions as profit endeavors seek ways to address the problems that capitalism itself has caused; this circularity constitutes an iron cage of ideology that may prevent policymakers from asking deeper questions about endemic policy problems.

In examining urban policy problems, a principal question is: who defines the problem and sets the agenda? In an ideal democratic setting, the agenda-setting stage of the policy process is participatory, negotiated, and discursive. However, the market-fundamentalist logic that has animated neoliberal reform agendas validates a supply-side approach to problem-definition in which the smart solutions on offer dictate which problems are identified and how they are specified. In short, smart city technologies have been promoted as solutions to artfully constructed policy problems—those that appear to rely on gathering more data and digitizing or automating urban service delivery systems. This application of smart cities perpetuates a narrow approach to problem definition that drills down on already "knowable" aspects of problems while discounting complexity in problem determinants that elude metricization and rationalization (including social and political dynamics). Narratives about policy problems focus more on what smart cities can immediately solve than on what undergirds policy failures, and

in this way such narratives lure policymakers into thinking about problems in the same ways, only even more quickly and cheaply as technology allows; the novelty lies in the method rather than in the perspective or epistemic. As such, the future of cities could be defined by how capitalist logic is redefined (or otherwise), including towards more participatory and discursive frames of governance that interrogate the foundations of systemic problems rather than relying quixotically on identifying technologically sophisticated ways that the impacts of such problems can be alleviated.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to understand how sustainability and smartness narratives present themselves as novel while perpetuating legacy ways of thinking about policy problems invite a critical view of how governance is normatively imagined. The origins of the good governance movement hold some insights into how narratives about the primacy of constructs like capitalism (including market fundamentalism) become entrenched, morph into ideas that serve momentary political values (e.g., smart), and preserve their longstanding epistemic orientations. An assessment of this process prompts the question: "smart and sustainable *for what*?" One answer is that cities are cast by entrenched economic interests as needing sustainable and smart policies to stabilize social, political, and environmental conditions for the furtherance of the capitalist project. The credibility of this policy project is maintained through the power and privilege of an elite expert or knowledge class—not only government technocrats but also consultants, academics, and public intellectuals. According to Kuecker and Hartley (2020), "the technocrat's ability to produce knowledge becomes a gesture through which power guides discourse about normative goals . . . this convergence of policy, technocracy, and planning points to teachable optics" (p. 521). These optics invite further critical scrutiny about capitalism as an ideological force underlying the narrative frames that shape city futures.

This chapter has critically assessed the process by which narratives about smart and sustainable governance become institutionalized and assume positions of discursive privilege. In closing, it is pertinent to note

that the exclusion of alternative epistemologies that attends this privilege is obscured by perfunctory and often patronizing overtures to participation. Kuecker and Hartley (2021) state that "the paradox of the development project was that the implementation of participatory programs required it to transform subjects into a particular version of empowered agents to serve the narrative of inclusion, but only after they had internalized long-running messages about their own inferiority and dependency" (p. 14). The discursive hegemon of instrumental rationalism, in its various branded iterations, brooks no dissent and replicates itself in both hard (institutional) and soft (rhetorical) ways; as such, it does violence to stores of knowledge and consciousness that are centuries or millennia in the making (including so-called folk or local wisdom that is often found in indigenous communities). Capitalist logic is the principal economic leitmotif within the narrative iterations of good governance and blends with instrumental rationalism to valorize a myopic market-based solutionism that never meets a problem it deems too complex. This chapter has extended this argument to explore the institutionalization of governance reform narratives and to examine how the capitalist project of good governance has reconstituted itself in the sustainable and smart movements. Efforts to re-think how capitalism shapes urban futures cannot afford to overlook more than a century of embedded economic interests and their profound influence on how society understands policy challenges.

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