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Book Review: Planning as if People Matter: Governing for Social Equity

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Book Reviews

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Brenman, M., and T. W. Sanchez. 2012. *Planning as if People Matter: Governing for Social Equity* (Part of the "Metropolitan Planning + Design" Series). Washington, DC: Island Press. 203 pp. \$35 paperback. ISBN: 9781610910125.

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In *Planning as if People Matter: Governing for Social Equity*, Brenman and Sanchez offer a compelling and accessible volume which equips planners and public managers, particularly students and early career professionals, with some of the knowledge required to put social equity squarely at the center of their work. Although not explicitly referenced, the book serves as a contemporary rejoinder to the prominent equity planning movement led by Norman Krumholz in the 1970s. Both the present volume and its predecessor promote values of justice, fairness, and inclusion as guiding principles for decision making in the public sphere.

After a brief introduction emphasizing the importance of incorporating social equity concerns into planning and governance activities, Chapter 2 turns to a summary of relevant statistics and trends. Planners may find the author's discussion of US Census data and its shortcomings to be the most useful of this section. Although great strides have been made in accounting for marginalized individuals, persistent problems with undercounting continue to impact less advantaged groups in terms of political representation and funding decisions. However, despite its contributions, Chapter 2 exemplifies a duality that exists throughout the volume: although the book can be recommended for its succinctness, its brevity often sacrifices a level of nuanced explanation that in some cases may have improved the author's arguments. For instance, the authors have very little to say about well-documented trends associated with the suburbanization of poverty and increasing displacement pressures in the central city, issues which are arguably among the most pressing for our nation's vulnerable populations.

Chapter 3 offers ideas for an ethical code that takes seriously the responsibility of planners in advancing equitable outcomes. The following chapter extends this discussion by arguing for the role of diversity and inclusion in fostering understanding, trust, and credibility between planners and the public. By considering principles that could result from

placing social justice at the center of all government actions, these sections are useful supplements to most codes of conduct set forth by planning and other professional certification bodies. However, some readers may crave a deeper exploration of the role normative values play in shaping our ethical principles. A more comprehensive discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of social equity may have also served to better equip readers in addressing questions fundamental to the adoption of an equity lens.

The subsequent two chapters are possibly the book's best, with concrete recommendations for furthering social justice through meaningful public involvement (Chapter 5) and the use of technology (Chapter 6). The authors provide an antidote to any disillusionment planners may harbor toward participatory efforts by reminding us of the importance of public involvement for the health of our democracy and for the justness of our decisions. They offer tangible advice for enhancing the continuity, transparency, and integrity of these processes. Chapter 6 is similarly useful, with a well-balanced discussion highlighting both the benefits of information communication technologies (ICTs)—e.g., increasing knowledge transfer and transparency, fostering greater inclusion, and improving accountability—along with their potential downsides. The authors guide the reader in considering how uneven access to technological resources and skills might be addressed so that ICTs result in meaningful participation and inclusion, as opposed to the further empowerment of advantaged groups and possible disengagement of more marginalized populations.

The book concludes with two chapters outlining the equity toolbox available to practitioners. Several important points are made. The authors caution planners about assuming that their outsider's perspective of a problem is consistent with the experiences of those living amidst it. For instance, a thorough discussion about poverty highlights the ambiguities that often lurk behind problems that, on their surface, can appear to be clear-cut. The authors also emphasize that meaningful changes in social justice require critical reconsideration of how planners are educated. They advocate for professionally mandated curricula that fosters cultural competency, promotes an understanding of the ways in which institutions may perpetuate systems of discrimination, and develops skills to address structural inequities. Finally, they offer sound recommendations for incorporating equity impact assessments into the project review process.

Practitioners may find that some of the book's broad recommendations lack grounding in the realities of everyday planning in which conflicts between widely divergent public values must be negotiated within a system that too often skews toward powerful interests. Nonetheless, the author's intent to "aim high"

(p. 174) in their goals is commendable, and results in a book which successfully argues that a commitment to fairness, justice, and equity in the formation and implementation of public policy is core to the work of planners and others engaged in governance activities.

Weir, M., Pindus, N., Wial, H., and Harold Wolman. 2012. *Urban and Regional Policy and Its Effects: Volume 4 Building Resilient Regions*. 1–341 pp. \$32.95. ISBN: 978-0-8157-2284-7. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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This book situates a number of important planning topics in terms of an increasingly popular frame for analyzing cities and regions: resilience. Resilience is a complex and wide-ranging concept, and its emergence in the planning literature in recent years has coincided with growing contemporary interest among scholars about how cities can better plan for or mitigate negative effects of disasters, climate change, or economic decline. This edited volume looks at topics with currency for scholars of regional economics, urban politics, and planning in the United States.

One way to approach resilience, as one contributor suggests, is to distinguish between the notion of it as a *capacity* and also as an *outcome*. The six empirical chapters in the book lean heavily toward the former through the use of comparative case studies from a number of cities and regions. In several chapters, resilience is cast as local and regional responses to expansive and complex issues with roots that may extend far beyond jurisdictional boundaries. These issues frame, for example, the pieces examining the varied responses to immigrant incorporation, how urban philanthropic organizations may overlook the incidence of suburban poverty and human service need, and how local actors have struggled to succor neighborhoods hit by the home foreclosure crisis.

Two chapters examine equity issues of relevance to housing and transportation scholars. Todd Swanstrom's piece analyzing local responses to housing foreclosures underscores the importance of networking and collaboration among local governments, nonprofits, and business interests to identify and direct federal relief to neighborhoods most in need. Another contribution by Rolf Pendall and colleagues contemplates the possibility of leveraging transit-oriented developments located along light rail systems as a means for addressing regional housing and transportation equity issues in a comparative case study of four ongoing rail projects. The chapter by Edward Hill and colleagues on regional economic resilience combines a comparative case study with hypothesis testing. The authors

focus on changes in regional employment and growth in response to economic shocks using a large national panel data set. Their results challenge some conventional thinking on the topic and point to important areas for future work. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the economic development policies of six cities from across the country, finding that civic and business leaders were largely unsuccessful at responding to regional economic stresses.

Several contributors point to the role of federal and state assistance in promoting regional capacity for resiliency. A common thread is the importance of local "experimentation" whereby local governments and nonprofits could promote networks for collaboration among local actors; something akin to what Swanstrom calls in his chapter "opportunity spaces." Higher levels of government can support practices by local governments and civil society organizations through tying funding requirements to complementary goals (e.g., transportation grants to projects with affordable or mixed income housing elements), linking the planning activities of state social service agencies more directly with regional needs and promoting leadership initiatives, and providing resources for disseminating research and practice among local business and nonprofit coalitions. Yet, it is also clear from the book that the capacities and interests of local actors to forge such coalitions varies considerably, whether through fragmentation of voting interests, a lack of political leadership to build support behind the benefits of regional transit, or ignorance or indifference on the part of decision makers about regional needs and implications of local social services spending.

Overall, the chapters are clearly written and each situates the discussion and analysis of resilience to complementary scholarship. Yet, there remain a few weaknesses with the book. First, most chapters tend toward the descriptive or speculative. This exploratory approach is important for laying the groundwork for future research, but offers little in conclusive or concrete lessons for practitioner audiences. Second, several chapters draw on purposefully sampled comparative case studies which are assessed against a resilience outcome expectation that is either vaguely defined or which closely resembles one particular case from the sample. As the nature and severity of the same stressor may vary from place to place at the outset, it can be difficult to establish in this format what preexisting institutional or capacity conditions are most significant in promoting resilience—especially when stress unfolds slowly and unevenly. These issues correspond to recent concerns about the difficulty