

## “Urban Power”: Variations and Generalizations from Global South Cities

**Book review of the book: ‘Urban Power: Democracy and Inequality in São Paulo and Johannesburg’, by Benjamin Bradlow, published in 2024 by Princeton University Press.**

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**Abstract:** This article provides a review on the main arguments of the book ‘Urban Power: Democracy and Inequality in São Paulo and Johannesburg’ by Ben Bradlow, aiming to situate it in a broader contemporary discussion in the Urban Studies literature. Drawing from the premise that urban inequalities in informal settlements are the greatest challenge facing local governments today, the author asks why some cities are more effective than others at reducing inequalities in the built environment. By comparing changes in institutions and policies for the distribution of urban goods in two cities – São Paulo (Brazil) and Johannesburg (South Africa) – after each of their democratic transitions, he argues that the configuration of ‘urban power’, which happens in a dual process between ‘embeddedness’ and ‘cohesion’, is what explains the variation in responses between local governments.

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The book 'Urban Power: Democracy and Inequality in São Paulo and Johannesburg', by Ben Bradlow, was published in 2024 by Princeton University Press as part of the Princeton Studies in Global and Comparative Sociology series. The outcome of a research Bradlow conducted between 2014 and 2020 in the PhD program in Sociology at Brown University (advised by Patrick Heller), the book is organized across a preface and six chapters (including conclusion), plus an appendix containing methodological notes and an appendix with the list of interviewees. Drawing from the premise that urban inequalities in informal settlements are perhaps the greatest challenge facing local governments today, the author asks, "Why are some cities more effective than others at reducing inequality?" (BRADLOW, 2024, p. 03).

At the core of this question about inequalities in urban everyday life is a more general question about democratic regimes' ability to effectively reduce social inequality. The author, nevertheless, assumes that there is agency in the urban context to address inequalities and conflicts in the built environment, that is, "local governments intervene" (BRADLOW, 2024, p. 168) and therefore are not mere reflections of a national or global structure. His research compares changes in institutions and policies for the distribution of public goods in two cities – São Paulo (Brazil) and Johannesburg (South Africa) – observed after the democratic transition in each of these countries. His aim is to analyze the variation in contemporary patterns of urbanization and inequality in democratic regimes in two cities in the Global South, taking São Paulo as a positive case in terms of inequality reduction and Johannesburg as a negative case.

There are a number of assumptions underlie his research design. First, the empirical finding that there are different ways for local governments to address informal settlements, which result in a greater or lesser reduction of local inequalities. Second, the profound connection between social inequalities and the cities' built environments. Third, the idea that there are social conflicts that help to understand political and institutional actions underlying the built environment. Fourth, that the distribution of public goods is a good predictor of social inequality, as it is understood as an inclusion issue. Finally, the understanding that slums ('favelas' in Brazilian Portuguese and 'mjondolos' in isiZulu) are the central spaces of exclusion in cities.

Each of the two cities is analyzed according to their history of distribution of three public goods, albeit they are not exclusively provided by the state: 01. housing and land use, 02. basic sanitation, and 03. transportation. At the national level, both in Brazil and South Africa, the equal distribution of such goods was enshrined as a constitutional principle after the democratic transition. Moreover, Bradlow (2024) argues that the two cities have a number of local similarities: São Paulo has a 'de facto' apartheid parallel to the apartheid 'de jure' of Johannesburg; in both cities the history of urban exclusion – aggravated under authoritarian regimes – is closely connected to the struggle for democracy, which essentially mobilized urban actors and movements; and both have a different history compared to other cities in the same national

context, which supports the understanding that there are important local variables to analyze.

While there are a number of common initial factors, their histories have been quite different when it comes to reducing spatial inequalities. Generally speaking, the case of São Paulo is comparatively positive because, while informal settlements in the city have recorded a slight growth, the material conditions and quality of life of its residents have improved significantly, with greater sanitation coverage and a unified and integrated public transport network, structured with unified, partially subsidized fares. The comparatively negative case of Johannesburg is characterized by a period in which racial segregation in the city decreased, yet a 'neo-apartheid' emerged at the intersection of race and class – informal settlements somewhat decreased, but sanitation provision remained low and the transport network continued to be based on private minibuses, characterized by fragmentation and informality.

The author dedicates a chapter to each policy sector: 'Housing: subaltern rights and elite resistance', 'Transportation: institutions versus technology', and 'Sanitation: cohesion versus competition'. In each one, he empirically outlines the processes and configurations that resulted in more or less spatially distributive policies. Fieldwork and semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018 (and primary documentation collected and analyzed), looking back on policy making and implementation processes. These histories especially shed light on a set of actors who operate and influence cities and the different forms of local organization beyond the state/elites duo, echoing an age-old question, "Who governs?" (DAHL, 1961), which Bradlow formulates as "who is involved in the work of city-making that determines the distribution of life chances of all who live there?" (BRADLOW, 2024, p.178).

The central argument of the book is that the configuration of 'urban power' is what explains the variation in responses among local governments regarding a greater or lesser distribution of public goods to informal settlements, resulting in cities that reinforce 'social closure' or build urban inclusion. This power is built in a dual process: on the one hand, residents/activists, through organizations or movements, build formal and informal links with governments to have their demands met – 'embeddedness'; on the other hand, the creation of state capacities to ensure such deliveries – 'cohesion'. Analyzing the configuration of 'urban power' and how it is mobilized in different cities would therefore explain different outcomes in inequality reduction.

While there is an approximation with the literature of social movements that highlights other collective actors beyond class coalitions – especially regarding the history of housing and land use policies and the demands coming from housing movements –, the social actors analyzed also include brokers, informal markets, international networks, and others. Also, distribution regimes are not restricted to the bureaucrat-activist relationship, as they also involve vertical and horizontal institutional

coordination and mobilization of bases of voters, for example. In this regard, the research is in dialogue with a neo-institutionalist literature that addresses local government with the notion of 'urban governance', encompassing multiple actors and arrangements that vary in time and space and blur the boundaries between the public and private sectors (LE GALÉS, 2011; LOWNDES, 2001; PIERRE, 2011; STOKER, 1998). While these analyses consider influences of national and global factors, the local government is not understood as a mere rebuttal of them.

This perspective is connected to the double theoretical movement proposed in the book: on the one hand, "to bring cities back" in Political Sociology; on the other, "to bring institutions of the state back in" the Sociology of Cities (BRADLOW, 2024, p. 177). The author provides a synthesis of these two gaps in two interdisciplinary currents approaching local governments. One is informed by a structural urban logic, which emphasizes the primacy of global dynamics to the detriment of local agency, in which the approaches of 'global cities', urban neoliberalism, growth machine theory, and urban regime theory are situated. The latter two, while primarily focused on local politics and institutions, underscore the alignment of local governments with business elites in favor of an economic growth program. Bradlow (2024) argues that the tools of these approaches homogeneously treat different cities' regulatory and implementation capacities and do not allow us to analyze the coordination between local politicians and actors other than corporate actors, nor do they allow us to look into the achievement of programmatic objectives connected to the "right to the city".

Meanwhile, the second current looks into the conditions under which collective action can promote redistribution. Either drawing from the power resources theory, which focuses on the alignments between class coalitions and political parties in democratic regimes and their role for the implementation of redistributive policies and, consequently, inequality reduction; or from the literature of social movements that underscore other forms of collective action. This current is mostly grounded in policy studies at the national level and rarely explores the mechanisms that explain the different local state capacities.

None of these currents can envision the different histories Bradlow (2024) empirically found regarding the characteristics of urban governance that result in variations in distributive outcomes in local governments and the relationship between the demands from movements and state and bureaucratic capacities to effectively implement inequality reduction policies in the built environment of cities. In this sense, his research is not only an empirical puzzle, but also a theoretical puzzle about the institutional conditions that lead to a greater distribution of goods in cities.

To explain both the relational connections and networks between movements and bureaucracy and the processes of horizontal and vertical institutional coordination – both understood dynamically and relationally –, Bradlow (2024) respectively employs the 'embeddedness-cohesion' conceptual duo. The sequence between them is

fundamental to depict the mutual strengthening or weakening of a local government, in a typology of four possible configurations of urban regimes for the distribution of public goods: 'rentier', 'mobilizational', 'managerial', and 'integrationist'. The effort to draw generalizations from the compared cases is consistent with Randolph and Storper's statement: "Global urban theory and context-sensitivity are not opposed to one another" (RANDOLPH and STORPER, 2023, p.17). While, on the one hand, these configurations emphasize the primacy of local contingency over the national and global structure, on the other hand, given the heterogeneity of each case, the proposed conceptual matrix allows the theoretical findings of the research to travel to and be tested in other cities in the Global South and beyond.

Finally, it should be noted that the post-democratic transition time frame is fundamental to build the analysis that the cases are different. Nevertheless, adopting a longer time frame could highlight important factors that differentiate processes within the Global South itself. For example, some important differences to be pointed out between São Paulo and Johannesburg include the more than seventy-year difference between the Proclamation of the Republic in each country (1889, in Brazil and 1961, in South Africa). The argument by Sebastián Mazzuca (2021) for Latin America that differentiates the moments of formation and constitution of its states, which could be extended to former African colonies. And the difference between urbanization periods in each continent, called 'late urbanization' in African cities (FOX and GOODFELLOW, 2022) and 'not-so-late urbanization' in Latin American cities (MARQUES, 2024), which resulted in specific urban characteristics. These three aspects point to a research agenda that connects an expanded time frame to the recent history of these countries after their democratic transitions.

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