

Book Review: Post-growth planning. cities beyond the market economy

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## Book Review

### *Post-Growth Planning. Cities Beyond the Market Economy*

Edited By Federico Savini, António Ferreira, Kim von Schönfeld (2022)

Routledge, New York and London, 2022, 253 pages, ISBN 9780367751005.

In times of global environmental crisis and after decades of policies trying to ‘fix’ capitalism through solutions like sustainable development and green growth that have been proven ineffective (Hickel & Kallis, 2020), the alternative proposals of post-growth and degrowth gain increasing attention. The socio-ecological transformation envisaged by post- and degrowth proponents is centred on a reduced social metabolism (i.e. a reduction of resource and energy use), local and global social equity and a different imaginary of what the good life is. Originating from disciplines such as anthropology and economics though, the ideas on how this transformation might be realized in space has remained too often limited to a simplistic proposal of localism (Krähmer, 2022; Mocca, 2020). In recent years, a growing debate has engaged around the question of how post- and degrowth can be spatialized (Krähmer, 2022). The book *Post-Growth Planning* contributes to this debate, in particular in relation to spatial planning.

The book’s first merit is to evidence the complexity of the task: imagining space and place beyond growth requires change at many levels. The edited book, with sixteen chapters by both well-established and emerging scholars, is organized in eight parts: basic principles; housing; mobility; governance and commons; planning regulations and land ownership; food systems and policies; being a post-growth planner and closes with a manifesto. While this variety makes a summary difficult, the choice to combine two contributions on each of these themes,

guarantees a non-dogmatic, pluralist reflection on what needs to change in our planning system(s) and urban imaginaries.

The two introductory chapters discuss the principles of the post- and degrowth debate (Chapter 1) and argue why sustainable urban development is a false solution, leading to cost-shifting (e.g. externalising the impacts of lithium extraction to Chile) or to perverse violations of social justice (e.g. displacements due to the construction of the ‘eco-city’ in Tianjin, China) rather than effective sustainability (Chapter 2). Afterwards the book turns to visions and proposals of change, based on both theoretical arguments and case studies. Three threads link most contributions. First, the necessity of systemic change: it is not enough to implement given technological innovations, authors argue, rather fundamental and complex changes of politics, policies, institutions, practices and even of one’s being as a planning practitioner or scholar (see Chapters 13 and 14) are needed. Second, a crucial step is to change the social imaginary away from the ambition of endless growth and profit to an idea of well-being in interdependent communities to create the cultural basis for political and institutional change. Third, a relational worldview and a collective dimension are central: beyond the individualization of responsibility in mainstream environmental discourses which reduces people to consumers, many contributions in the book advocate a responsabilization of people as (active) citizens, interconnected with nature (chapter 14), mobilized for example in processes of commoning with reference to housing (Chapters 3 and 4), governance (Chapters 7 and 8) and food systems and policies (Chapter 12). These proposals are not simply wishful thinking as the proposed case studies of existing practices show (Chapters 3, 4, 8, 12 and 14). In this way, the book responds to the call for ‘concrete hope’ that Simin Davoudi makes in the foreword. Challenges are approached by authors without taking shortcuts; rather their complexity is acknowledged, for instance when

Savini and Bossuyt in Chapter 3 recognise the risks of their ‘degrowth housing project’ in Amsterdam remaining an elitist enclave or being coopted and they discuss how its governance structure is built to avoid these risks. Also, it is made clear that collective choices come at some expense, for instance losing the ambition of individual economic revenue through the ownership of housing as both Savini and Bossuyt and Nelson and Chatterton (Chapter 4) note – for the benefit of a richness of social life and mutual support. Or, as Sandercock puts it (Chapter 14): ‘all change [...] involves some loss’ (pag. 209).

Notwithstanding the emphasis on the collective, in this book the ideological preference for the ‘local’ seems to be overcome – still, most case studies refer to fairly small, localized practices. It may be difficult to find practices at larger scales and dimensions that correspond to the rigorous criteria of de- and post-growth thought, as they need to act in the interstices of a growth-oriented society. Perhaps we need to go beyond the research of ideal solutions and also look at the pros and cons of ‘messier’ practices at larger scales. However, examples for this approach are present in Chapter 4 – large Zurich housing cooperatives and their ‘messy’ realities. Also, Xue’s discussion (Chapter 10) of the importance of the regional and national levels in planning law contributes to this question.

Another pending question is how the different themes and aspects of post-growth planning visions might interact. Would their interplay in concrete places be seamless? Or might there be contradictory and problematic effects? More than constituting a critique, these two questions confirm that the work done by the authors of *Post-Growth Planning* stimulates further research and debate.

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