



## Cities and communities beyond COVID-19

by Robin Hambleton, Bristol, UK, Bristol University Press, Covid-19 Collection, 2020, 180 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5292-1585-4

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Cities and communities beyond COVID-19**, by Robin Hambleton, Bristol, UK, Bristol University Press, Covid-19 Collection, 2020, 180 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5292-1585-4

*Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19* is published by Bristol University Press in the Covid-19 Collection. It is written by Robin Hambleton, Emeritus Professor of City Leadership in the Faculty of Environment and Technology at the University of the West of England, Bristol and Director of Urban Answers. This short book of 7 chapters with a Forward by Marvin Rees, the Mayor of Bristol, presents an important brief on the excesses of central control and the need to rethink how to empower local communities throughout the world. The book is a most useful manifesto on the important role of cities and local communities in promoting social, racial, economic and environmental justice. It should be read by all those working at the local level – in and out of government – to address what Hambleton defines as the four major challenges of our time: COVID-19, the economic downturn arising from the pandemic, global climate change, and social, economic and racial inequality. His main argument is that we must strengthen the ‘civic capacity’ of localities to improve societal and environmental resilience, including our response to COVID-19. The way to address these challenges, he avers, is to confront ‘place-less power’ and to develop inclusive civic leadership.

Hambleton characterizes place-less power as a ‘malign’ force associated with globalization, the growth of multinational companies and ‘decision makers who are unconcerned about the impacts of their decisions on communities living in particular places.’ Although the book gives short shrift to how nations and cities can weaken place-less power, it is chock full of valuable examples that illustrate inclusive civic leadership. Hambleton provides case studies of his city, Bristol, England; and what he calls ‘innovation cameos’ of Copenhagen, Denmark; Dunedin, New Zealand; Frieberg, Germany; Portland, Oregon; and Mexico City. Moreover, to his credit Hambleton reviews relevant theory and concepts in public management, which are useful for all practitioners in the field working to improve urban infrastructure and services. In addition, Hambleton reviews what he calls the central challenge – improving governance. He synthesizes with concision and insight, a broad literature on markets, civil society and the state, the main theme of the school in which I teach – Wagner, New York University. He also covers the experience of public service reform in the UK – the challenge of tackling bureaucratic paternalism; the emergence of the third sector, voluntary sector, or in American parlance, the non-profit sector; the rise of the new public management; the many dimensions of leadership; the importance of values and public innovation; and, not least, the critical role of citizen empowerment, collaboration and partnerships.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Hamilton’s book is the way in which he weaves together the multiple concepts alluded to above and shows their relevance to the way we must confront COVID-19, and in the longer-run climate change. In public policy and public management, as in life, it is important to believe in the importance and meaning of what we do – whatever it is. This is what sustains us beyond the necessities of material existence. And this is why those working at the local level – in and out of government – would find inspiration and practical knowledge in Robin Hamilton’s manifesto.

Beyond such kudos for Hamilton’s work, I would nevertheless raise a number of questions for his subsequent call to arms – both in the realm of action, as well as within the sphere of needed research. First, I raise a cautionary note on the limits of local leadership and policy in an age of globalization. Second, I suggest that distinctions be made, among cities and communities, by population size and per capita income. Finally, I call for more systematic comparative research on the relative success and failure of urban health policy and management across different categories of cities.

On the first point, a view from the United States where local power is notoriously well developed with respect to tax raising authority and decentralized power, I worry that inclusive civic leadership in many states and local communities could restrict voting rights, racial integration of schools and hospitals, and access to health services including vaccinations. Even in such bastions of American liberalism, e.g. San Francisco and New York City, land use controls by local zoning boards have served the interests of wealthy residents who resist densification and construction of affordable housing in their neighborhoods. As economist Edward Glaeser asks, in a recent New York Times Op Ed piece: ‘How many jobless people can afford to leave Youngstown, Ohio, where the median home price in 2019 was about 103,000, USD to go to San Jose, California, where the median price was 1,265 USD million?’ To solve this problem, he argues that President Biden’s infrastructure plan should ‘ensure that no benefits go to states that fail to make verifiable progress enabling housing construction in their high wage, high-opportunity areas’ (Glaeser 2021). As Joseph Schumpeter argued long ago in analyzing the limitations of market competition, the ‘powerful lever is made of other stuff’ (Schumpeter 1942). In this case, the lever is national policy. But Schumpeter was referring to what he called ‘creative destruction’ – the destruction of old organizational forms and their replacement by new ones thanks to innovation and new technologies. Such change goes beyond what cities and communities can do for themselves.

And yet, as Benjamin Barber argues and Hambleton concurs: ‘... In today’s globalizing world, the city has become democracy’s best hope.’ Barber imagines a world in which mayors rule and argues that dysfunctional

national governments may no longer be the most important players in an increasingly urbanized and connected world dependent on cities and multilateral institutions (Barber 2013). Whether or not one subscribes to this view, it is hard to disagree with Hambleton's view that there has been important international dialogue among cities and communities and a great deal of innovation among cities. This has led to a certain amount of 'cross-border lesson- drawing,' and networks of cities ranging from sister-city arrangements, the C40 network and EUROCITIES. In this respect, although Hambleton presents interesting cases of innovation and calls for more research to improve the quality of 'international lesson-drawing,' I would question the utility of comparing cities as different as Mexico City to smaller ones like Copenhagen, Frieberg, Bristol and Dunedin. To be sure, at the end of the day, city governments must pick up the garbage, provide transportation, wrestle with inequality, manage pollution and provide health care for the most vulnerable. The scale of the problems and challenges, however, are quite different. In thinking about Mexico City, it may be more useful to compare it to other megacities, worldwide.

Finally, however inspiring it is to assemble cases of urban innovation and inclusive civic leadership among cities, once Hambleton's book sparks enthusiasm among all those who should read it, the next step, I think, would be to sponsor some systematic comparative research on the relative success and failure of urban health policy and

management, particularly in the megacities of middle-income and developing nations. This requires the construction of a database on health services and health at the city and neighborhood levels, and some assessment of the evidence not just on what appears to work but also on interesting failures and the factors that are more likely to lead to success (Gusmano and Rodwin 2016).

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