

Resilience in the Post-Welfare Inner City: Voluntary Sector Geographies in London, Los Angeles and Sydney, Geoffrey DeVerteuil, 2015, Policy Press, 288 pages, ISBN: 978-1447316558, £70.00 (hardback).

in the Post-Welfare Inner City is a book some 20 years in the making, and represents the culmination of a long-term commitment to excavating the role that increasingly residual voluntary sector organisations and ‘hubs’ play in maintaining sites of collective consumption for neoliberalism’s ‘surplus populations’. The focal point of the book is the ‘how’ of resilience; how do voluntary sector hubs, providing much needed welfare services in an increasingly hostile environment, both ideologically and materially, hang-on in cities whose developmental processes exert considerable pressure toward their displacement and disappearance.

DeVerteuil explores these issues through an in-depth comparative analysis of voluntary sector service provision across ten neighbourhoods in three global inner-city regions – London, Los Angeles and Sydney. The intention behind using an explicitly comparative methodology is to draw out the similarities that exist over and above the differences, whilst simultaneously drawing out salient particularities to problematize the grand narratives that frame much of the book’s analysis, namely neoliberalism and post-welfarism. DeVerteuil shares Gibson-Graham’s (2006) critique of ‘strong theory’, challenging totalising explanations that pit “all powerful, all pervasive and impossible to challenge” (228) processes of neoliberalism, gentrification and urban revanchism against already doomed subjects of change, in favour of what he calls a more flexible critical geography, developed from a grounded appreciation of the ambiguous and interstitial spaces, practices and politics of voluntary service hubs in the post-welfare inner-city.

The book is organised into three sections, one conceptual, one empirical and the last reflective and forward looking.

The first section is helpfully organised around what the author calls his five cornerstones, providing structural clarity for the subsequent two sections, and aiding readers to navigate their way through the empirical analysis in a non-linear fashion – something that time-pressed readers will appreciate. These five cornerstones are: Neoliberalism and post-welfarism (the context and the ‘threat’); Resilience (the organising concept and response); the voluntary sector (the actor); the inner-city (the territory); and, comparison (the method).

Much space in the first section is given to the book’s organising concept, the “rascal and chaotic” (Ward, 2012: 20) concept of resilience. The author is at pains throughout this book to salvage resilience for critical geography. In light of some comprehensive critiques of resilience, most notably from Tom Slater (2014) and Katherine Diprose (2015), DeVeurteil works hard to show that resilience can be more than a concept of and for the neoliberal status quo. Drawing in particular on the work of Cindy Katz (2004), he asserts that resilience has a critical part to play in a progressive politics as a foundation upon which more transformational practices, policies and politics can be built. Resilience, he argues, can be dynamic, adaptive, and, over time, incrementally transformative.

In the second, and largest, section of the book, the author presents empirical findings from over 100 interviews with voluntary sector organisations in London, Los Angeles and Sydney, demonstrating the various ways in which they are socially and spatially resilient. He does this by categorising the ten neighbourhoods into four place types – established gentrified; mixed; pioneer gentrified; and immigrant enclaves – and devoting a chapter to each in which and he details the various practices and strategies deployed by voluntary organisations in order to persist in place in the face of considerable pressures towards their displacement. The second section ends with a comparative analysis of the three cities, suggesting that there are three commonly identifiable strategies to outflank and outlast gentrification amongst voluntary hubs: private strategies, such as owning property outright, or leasing from sympathetic landlords; voluntary sector strategies, involving community solidarity and mobilisation against “the fragmentation and do-eat-dog competition over scarce resources,

funding and clients that purportedly mars the voluntary sector” (200); and political strategies, pointing to local state interventions to support voluntary hubs and their ‘clients’.

In the final section, DeVeurteil returns to his core concern to salvage resilience for critical geography. To do this he explores the links between social and spatial resilience and the commons, arguing, in an unfortunately brief section, that voluntary service hubs represent a sort of ‘incremental commons’. As well as being able to survive and persist in the inner-city, both physically, by staying in place, and ideologically, by maintaining a commitment to collective consumption, voluntary service organisations, he suggests, offer a potentially transformative basis from which the logic, and actually existing forms of, capitalist enclosure, can be challenged by collective and non-commodifiable spaces of solidarity. Recast as commons, he suggests “that service hubs can potentially – and incrementally – be preservative *and* generative, defensive *and* productive, a necessary way-station on the path towards more socially just transformation, rather than merely as ‘anti-enclosures’, which imply only delaying and obfuscating, but never truly changing the inevitable outcome of eventual enclosure and displacement” (242).

There is much to commend this book. The author’s commitment to a grounded empirical analysis of the ambiguous practices and politics of the voluntary sector ensures a rich and nuanced account and critique of neoliberalism and post-welfarism, both as on the ground social formations and as reified academic concepts. DeVeurteil’s insistence on the open and contingent nature of processes such as neoliberalism and gentrification is also welcome, for while he doesn’t gainsay the very real, day-to-day, challenges that the voluntary sector hubs, and the people they support, face, he also refuses to deny their agency and their capacity to contest and rework neoliberalising policy models under duress. The result is a sober, but ultimately hopeful analysis which I think will ring true for practitioners, policy makers and academics alike.

I was less convinced with the use of resilience as a political strategy of 'commoning' in this book. Whilst I do not disagree that there is some critical value in understanding how, in the face of neoliberalism, competing ideologies, practices and spaces persist and resist, and whilst I don't doubt that there is much to be gained from exploring and valorising a plurality of strategies on a continuum from the everyday and embodied politics, to the more spectacular moments of politics in the post-foundational sense, my concern with DeVeurteil's use of resilience is that he does not successfully connect resilience with a more radical imaginary (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). The reader is left wondering how, and under what conditions, resilience as a defensive strategy begets resilience as a generative and transformational process, which DeVeurteil suggests is the main way in which resilience can be salvaged as a concept. Without this connection, I am not convinced that he sufficiently answers the critiques of resilience of which he is both mindful and critical. For all of the agency that being resilient entails, being resilient does not imply challenging the nature of the changes against which one must be resilient, and this is problematic for voluntary organisations, whose progressive role ought to be, in part at least, to contribute robustly to discourses and practices around social justice in the city. Ultimately, by emphasising and valorising the prosaic and local practices and spaces of politics to the extent he does, the author risks making more ambitious expressions of transformative politics seem less realistic and feasible than they actually are.

Notwithstanding these reservations, *Resilience in the Post-Welfare Inner City* makes an empirically rich and conceptually interesting contribution to key debates in the constantly shifting 'landscapes of antagonism' (Newman, 2013) which make up local welfare provision and politics in today's period of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012). It will be of interest to a wide audience in and outside of academia who are concerned with the changing shape and nature of local welfare and collective consumption, gentrification and neoliberalism.

Joe Penny

University College London

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