

Book Review

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The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America

Alan Mallach

Mallach, Alan. *The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018.

Alan Mallach's discourse has generated major attention from the academia and the political arena since its publication. The book embodies extensive knowledge in urban politics and economic development of old industrial American cities. It pays much attention to how and why the Rust Belt cities like Detroit, Baltimore and Pittsburg have transformed to cities lacking opportunities due to globalization. Mallach opines that the social, economic and demographic dynamisms are driven by the complexities of race, poverty and power structures. The author also spotlights how changes in consumer preferences, family structure and immigration have altered the characters of cities following deindustrialization. He avers that Rust Belt cities' economic prosperity now rely heavily on 'eds' (higher education) and 'meds' (health care). The attraction of people moving into cities to get educated in universities, and others receiving medical attention in reliable medical institutions, are two major drivers to modern economic success, Mallach believes.

The discourse of the different rates at which young graduates are attracted to certain bustling and convivial cities, such as Pittsburg, Philadelphia and Baltimore at the detriment of others in this book, echoes the ‘creative class’ idea of Richard Florida. Healthy nightlife, entertainment machines, and diversity among others, were observed to attract the creative young graduates to cities. Although Mallach avers that this current trend creates and exacerbates inequalities within American cities.

The availability of functional medical care has proven to be imperative to cities’ sustainability, especially with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. More so, the availability of educational institutions in cities are important to the production of skilled labor for industrial establishments. The presence of the creative class draws investors to regions, claimed Mallach. However, can we conclude that ‘eds’ and ‘meds’ are the only major contributors to cities’ prosperity? Did Mallach apply any predictive model or reality study to ascertain if all cities have the comparative advantage in these industries to specialize in? For the fact that a comparative study was conducted between Pittsburg (where there was positive outcome) and Youngtown (where negative result was observed) does not necessarily result in a ‘one-size-fit all’ situation. If ‘eds’ and ‘meds’ become the foci of every urban policy making, what then becomes of other sectors? In as much as ‘eds’ and ‘meds’ are very important to cities’ success, other aspects of the urban also play major roles in thriving the economic activities.

Nonetheless, Mallach argues that intentional public policies that have resulted in social problems like gentrification and the inherent racial segregation in American cities, are influenced by the complexities of income and race. The author does a credible job in associating the root of gentrification process to urban economics, which significantly affords improvement to the

gentrification scholarship. Mallach posits that the much-criticized gentrification somewhat brings uneven development, but he disagrees on how it has been the hegemonic academic discourse that contributes to the pervasive urban problems, such as displacement. He however avers that ‘replacement’ is often experienced and observed instead of ‘displacement’, which many authors have missed in their researches, and generated faulty and weak inferences.

Hence, the book recommends some interesting policies to ameliorate the identified problems of the previous ten chapters. Mallach opines that ‘replacement’ should be tackled alongside and from the viewpoint of poverty, and not from gentrification’s perspective alone. This is because poverty is a major and early contributor to urban social problems of segregation, polarization, and exclusion. Although the author acknowledges that poverty may be impossible to end, but desired results could be realized. He is positive that the solutions to the ‘divided city’ problems could be simple than what one thinks. He recommends that the incremental and radical utopian approaches may not be feasible for the twenty-first century cities, as they have proven to be failed instruments. Mallach also warns that in order to realize social inclusion, city leaders should not be fooled into mirroring other cities’ successful policies, but on the contrary, must be contextual. The book uses a more convincing theme of ‘spatial equity’ to advise stakeholders in tackling urban inequalities. It is important that ‘equity’ is elevated over ‘equality’ in city policy making. This is because equality often times results in injustice. Take for instance, if opportunities are to be equally distributed across all social groups, cyclical inequality would still be the outcome. The logic is that social ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ syndrome has already been created among the different racial and income groups in cities, and applying equality as a means would only widen the social gaps further. ‘Equity’ is the means to the end of ‘equality’, because equity creates a fair and equal platform for all. Collectively, Mallach recommends more pragmatic solutions such as:

developing environment that encourages creation of jobs and connecting people to opportunities, and building strong educational and vocational system that helps train residents.

In sum, this book has been convincing on the possibilities of positive outcomes in tackling urban inequalities anywhere. I believe this urban scholarship will hold up in future urban political studies and practice.