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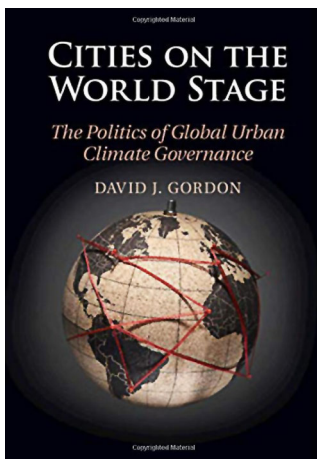


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# Gordon, David J. (2020): *Cities on the World Stage. The Politics of Global Urban Climate Governance*

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The Cities Climate Leadership Group (or just C40) defines itself as “a global network of mayors taking urgent action to confront the climate crisis and create a future where everyone can thrive”.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the C40 is a powerful actor in global climate politics both because of its convening power – it represents 97 powerful cities worldwide – and because of its influence on current thought about addressing climate change in urban areas. The role of the C40 as one of the most visible transnational networks of city governments in climate politics was emphasised in the report of the Work-

<sup>1</sup> As stated on their website <https://www.c40.org/> (03.05.2022).

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ing Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Mitigation of Climate Change), released on the 4th of April 2022.<sup>2</sup> The Summary for Policymakers (the part of the report that is agreed – line by line – between IPCC scientists and national governments) states the consensual view that transnational networks of city governments drive ambitious mitigation goals at the urban level and facilitate innovation and implementation through the exchange of knowledge and experience. David J. Gordon examines the constitution of the city as a “global governor” in world politics, through intervention in transnational networks. The C40 is the central case study that helps untie how local governments intervene in global climate politics.

Gordon’s central question is directed towards explaining C40’s success in becoming a global climate leader, despite the difficulties found during its establishment and early years (2005-2011). The inherently non-hierarchical nature of the network meant that it had no formal authority over its members, and yet, by 2018 the C40 was internationally recognised as a leading force in urban climate action. According to Gordon, C40’s success depends on its ability to generate a collective identity for participating cities. However, Gordon reminds us, this shared identity is itself a social construct and hence open for contestation, thus the authority to govern the climate is contingent and relationally linked to external recognition of positive results in urban action.

The book packs its punch in an account of the evolution of the governance practices of the C40 from 2005 to 2018. The account is collected in three chapters called Act I, Act II and Act III, each corresponding to a period in the institutional evolution of the C40 (contestation, conver-

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/> (03.05.2022).

gence, consolidation). Together, the three chapters read like a fast-paced adventure in making a global institution work effectively.

Gordon characterises the challenge faced by the C40 as one of establishing a common collective identity (within the institutional apparatus of the network and its city members) and attaining external recognition to enable its members to reap the reputational benefits of being part of the C40. The historical account of the evolution of narratives and practices of governance within the C40 illustrates this point. Gordon characterises the first period following the foundation of the C40 (2006–2011) as one of contestation and competition, as different actors struggled to impose their worldview on the organisation. Gordon focuses on the clash between a perspective that celebrated the market as a source of urban climate solutions – chiefly championed by the Clinton Climate Initiative – and a perspective led by the C40 Chair that emphasised the autonomy of cities as agents of global governance whose capacities were restricted by institutional structures and a chronic lack of resources. Gordon finds that precisely this lack of agreement between two fundamentally different worldviews is what limited C40’s efficacy and, hence, its external recognition.

In 2010, Michael Bloomberg (Mayor of New York City) took the chair of the C40. Gordon credits Bloomberg with the development of a new vision of urban climate governance which facilitated convergence between the members of the C40. This vision emphasised a business-oriented approach to city action and global accountability as means to overcome barriers to intercity ‘comprehension, cooperation and compassion’. In practice, concrete local actions were coupled with specific measurement and evaluation frameworks that demonstrated progress against global goals (for example, in the reduction of carbon emissions). Such vision fostered action in C40 cities (which tripled their climate activity between 2011 and 2016) and drew new members to the network, as cities sought to reap the substantial rewards of increasing recognition in the global arena of climate politics. According to Gordon, this approach secured external recognition for C40 cities and eventually became the gel bringing the network together, facilitating the consolidation of a common identity in the last period from 2013 to 2018.

Gordon’s narrative emphasises the role of cities as actors that hold precise ideas and strategies. As a result, the analysis emphasises the role of individual actors, sometimes reduced to the personalities of specific people, mostly powerful white men such as Bill Clinton, Ken Livingstone (Mayor of London), David Miller (Mayor of Toronto) and Michael Bloomberg. While such a view is undoubtedly reductive, it chimes with dominant understandings of urban governance that underscore the role of *the Mayor* as a heroic figure shaping the course of local affairs. A utopian ideal of *the*

*Mayor* is embedded in new municipalism accounts about the democratisation of the state through urban governance. Events such as the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (sometimes called the “World Mayors Assembly”) have gained weight in global politics with demands to localise the Sustainable Development Goals. As climate politics calls for governance approaches that move beyond nation-state deadlocks, Gordon’s analytical approach provides an alternative to engage critically with local governments as a hybrid figure in governance that is neither fully integrated into the state apparatus nor fully detached from it.

Another strength of Gordon’s analysis is the systematic application of a sociological framework, in this case, Bourdieu’s field theory. The application of sociological theory such as Bourdieu’s field theory presents complications because of the need to extend a sociological concept based on individual socialisation to the functioning of institutions, assuming institutions also develop analogous dispositions and relationships in their operation. The appropriation of field theory metaphors proves to be very powerful in Gordon’s analysis. The deployment of four interconnected concepts of field, habitus, capital and recognition provides an anchor for the comparison of different moments in policy thinking within the C40. Such analysis grounds the observation that the deployment of different forms of capital (financial capital and symbolic capital for example) does not automatically translate into authority within the climate politics arena.

As a heroic quest, the constitution of transnational networks of city governments requires the golden trove of legitimacy. What remains is a powerful account of transnational municipal networks that challenges their very conception as a network of interconnected items (in this case interconnected local governments). Gordon explains well why the network metaphor is not appropriate because what we know as transnational municipal networks both exceeds and does not meet the requirements of being a network. Sometimes networks are not actually networks, Gordon implies. In this case, transnational networks of city governments are *fields* that create the conditions to attract members – and, in some cases, to repulse them. Gordon’s study is more than a study of urban climate governance: it is also a study of the practices of authority-building and how they are deployed in the context of uncertainty.

If I have to summarise the book in one sentence, it is that the increasing presence of cities on the world stage relates to their possibility to achieve autonomous agency while at the same time providing mechanisms of global accountability. The key to success in Gordon’s view relates to C40’s emphasis on public disclosure and reporting of local action as an accountability mechanism that brings further recognition from global audiences.

“Cities on the World Stage” is a very serious book, analytic, clear-eyed and sufficiently signposted to make it readable for a large audience including undergraduates, postgraduates and advanced researchers interested in urban governance. At the same time, “Cities on the World Stage” is also a very entertaining book, full of humour and insider jokes, that demonstrates the value of a detailed storytelling of institutional histories. While deploying a critical analysis of idealistic narratives of city governments as nimble, prob-

lem-oriented governance entities, Gordon offers a quasi-utopian outlook on the potential of convergence and coordination mechanisms to energise cities’ action, once again confirming urban governance as a key arena to confront the challenges of the climate crisis.

**Full reference of reviewed title:**

Gordon, D.J. (2020): *Cities on the World Stage. The Politics of Global Urban Climate Governance*. Cambridge. 285pp.