Book Review

Environmental Politics and Governance in the Anthropocene

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Environmental Politics and Governance in the Anthropocene: Institutions and legitimacy in a complex world
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The recent and ongoing debate on the Anthropocene raises issues relevant for urban and regional planning and consequently also for all those working in the broad field of urban e-planning. Although the meaning of the word and concept of Anthropocene is far from consensual, and is even challenged (e.g., the exact date it started, the correct stratigraphic markers, political implications, and so on), as is shown in the book 'Environmental Politics and Governance in the Anthropocene: Institutions and legitimacy in a complex world', edited by Philipp Pattberg and Fariborz Zelli, the Anthropocene hypothesis must be considered, examined and discussed by all those engaged in urban e-planning, since it questions the effectiveness of the current governance institutions, the existing and prevailing types of participatory processes, and the distributive justice of political and social processes, including those in which urban e-planning is an essential part.

The book has 14 chapters and is organized into three parts. In the Introduction, the editors offer a summary of the Anthropocene hypothesis and of the governance challenges in the Anthropocene that is useful to guide readers in the following sections of the book. In Part I ('Making sense of the Anthropocene'), with four chapters, the authors discuss the notion of Anthropocene, highlighting some of its advantages and limitations. In chapter 2 ('The Anthropocene and the body ecologic'), Marcel Wissenburg provides a critic of the Anthropocene concept and hypothesis, from a moral perspective, and offers an historical overview of the development of this concept, which serves as a background for the debate that follows. In the next chapter ('Nature and the Anthropocene: The sense of an ending?'), Manuel Arias- Maldonado argues that the end of the idea of separation between humanity and nature challenges a number of important issues and raises also new perspectives that we need to address, proposing instead the acceptance of overlaps between society and nature as a new vision or starting point. This is followed in chapter 4 ('Anthropocene: delusion, celebration and concern'), written by Simon Hailwood, by a perspective similar to Wissenburg, in which Hailwood argues that

there will be no change if the human action remains central in the argument of end of nature. In the last chapter in this section ('Fair distribution in the Anthropocene: Towards a normative conception of sustainable development'), Simon Meisch, like Wissenburg in chapter 2, argues in favour of the need for more ethical changes in the governance field.

Part II ('Institutions in the Anthropocene') deals with the role of institutions and the implications of institutional complexity in the Anthropocene. In the first chapter in this section ('Mapping institutional complexity in the Anthropocene: a network approach'), Oscar Widerberg examines the structure of climate governance, which he characterizes as highly diversified, fragmented and complex, characteristics common to other cases of global environmental governance, as mentioned in the book, although in this case the findings suggest countries and cities play an important role, a point or finding that deserves further exploration by those engaged in urban and regional governance. Similar findings are presented in the next chapter ('Transnational governance towards sustainable biofuels: Exploring a polycentric view'), in which Christine Moser and Robert Bailis analyse the governance system in the field of biofuels. In chapter 8 ('Governing the Arctic in the era of the Anthropocene: Does corporate authority matter in Arctic shipping governance'), Judith van Leeuwen deals with the potential causes of institutional change in the governance of the Arctic shipping sector, a case in which the institutional landscape continues to be still marked or led by national states. The section concludes with chapter 9 ('International river governance: Extreme events as a trigger for discursive change in the Rhine river basin'), written by Christine Prokopf, in which the author examines the governance system of the river Rhine, suggesting the need of motivational and attitudinal changes for institutional change to occur.

The third and last part of the book ('Accountability and legitimacy in the Anthropocene') deals primarily with issues of legitimacy and accountability related with the diversity of implications associated with the Anthropocene. In the first chapter in this section ('Democratic accountability in the Anthropocene: Toward a non-legislative model'), Walter Baber and Robert Bartlett discuss the ethical foundation of the Anthropocene, and the implications of these issues for the creation of democratically legitimate institutions in the Anthropocene, a discussion also relevant for those engaged in urban and regional governance. The main argument of these two authors, as argued before by Simon Meisch in chapter 5, seems to suggest that there should be a flexible and diverse governance landscape at the international level, seen as a condition for a pluralist society, a change that requires new principles and democratic procedures, which the authors in part suggest in the chapter. Martine Kuhner, in chapter 11 ('Monitoring commitments made under the Kyoto Protocol: An effective tool for accountability in the Anthropocene?'), examines and discusses how the United Nations compliance system for climate works and functions in practice, arguing that soft instruments (e.g., processes of measurement, reporting and verification) can be useful and should be exploited more, before hard instruments are used. This is followed by the chapter written by Marija Isailovic - 'The legitimacy and transformation of global climate governance in the Anthropocene: implications for the global South' - which deals also with the governance of climate, highlighting the impact for the global South due to the changing patterns of authority in the Anthropocene, and its new winners and losers. In the last chapter 'The practices of lobbying for rights in the Anthropocene era: Local communities, indigenous peoples and international climate negotiations' Linda Wallbott examines one more dimension of the governance complexity in the Anthropocene, the co-existence and interrelation of different spaces for political action. The book ends with chapter 14 ('Conclusion: complexity, responsibility and urgency in the Anthropocene') in which the two co-editors offer a brief summary of the main issues explored and discussed in the previous chapters, the key findings of the volume, chapter by chapter, and end by questioning where to go from this point.

In sum, the book offers and confronts different interpretations of humanity-nature relationships. As the editors suggest, some of the points and perspectives raised in the book may not be new, but the way they are considered in this volume of essays is certainly innovative. The editors adopt

a structuration perspective, one that assumes that agency can shape structures but there are also structural limits to these actions. In other words, from this discussion we may retain, by analogy with the evidence provided for global governance, that there seems to be room for urban governance and urban planning to shape structural features of the Anthropocene within certain limits and constraints set by the new context. As argued in some of these chapters, despite the structural constraints and the systemic dynamics, there is ample room for human agency, a perspective that opens a whole range of possibilities that require debate, also in the field of urban governance and urban planning more specifically.

Although the concept of Anthropocene is mainly taken as being related to global environmental governance, it is also relevant for local governance, as it challenges issues and views taken for granted for a long time in this context. Some authors in this book have a skeptical perspective about the Anthropocene, while others endorse it and argue in favour of a new perspective of the relation between humanity and nature. Those in favour see it as a new opportunity for a better governance of the environment, while those that criticize it tend to question the rationale behind the Anthropocene hypothesis. The editors seem to support a constructive perspective of the Anthropocene hypothesis, arguing that excessive optimism or pessimism are both misplaced. In the book, the editors refer and discuss the assumption about the human-nature dualism and the argument or discourse on the end of nature. By questioning the nature-human dualism, the Anthropocene hypothesis, in the sense of arrival of a new Era, challenges our current conceptions of wilderness, conservation and sustainability, and therefore questions our conceptions of environmental policy, also necessarily at the local or urban scales. As the concept of the Anthropocene includes the idea of an unparalleled human capacity to influence the earth, this requires new perspectives on the governance of the planet at different scales, recognizing at the same time that this capacity is not uniform across the world. This has impact in the way we conceive local and urban governance too. In addition, the Anthropocene hypothesis, by placing the human capacity at the centre, inserts governance at the centre of the scientific and political debates, and this at multiple layers or levels of public administration - international, national and sub-national as well. In other words, despite the shortcomings of the concept of Anthropocene, as exposed in several chapters of the book, it is seen in itself as a challenge to the current research agendas and policies.

The book highlights numerous issues that need to be further researched. First of all, the concept of Anthropocene itself requires additional investigation and discussion. The mix of planning institutions and instruments requires more debates, as discussed in these essays. The numerous situations of complexity found also require complementary research. For urban planners and policy makers, the challenge seems to be to examine and to discuss the current institutional architectures and their appropriateness to deal with the new challenges that the Anthropocene hypothesis raises, also for the field of urban and regional governance. In sum, there is a need of a larger comparative research program, one in which urban and regional planning shall take part, since issues of urbanization and urban governance seem to be critical in this context, in a period of rapid urbanization and when more than half of the world population now lives in urban areas.

For all these reasons, I think the book 'Environmental Politics and Governance in the Anthropocene', edited by Philipp Pattberg and Fariborz Zelli, is an important scholarly contribution in the field of governance studies, namely for those engaged in global environmental governance issues, but also for urban and regional planners and policy makers in the broad field of urban and regional governance, and therefore it is of interest for readers of the International Journal of E-Planning Research.