Peter F Burns and Matthew O Thomas, *Reforming New Orleans: The Contentious Politics of Change in the Big Easy*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY and London, 2015; 226 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-5017-0044-6, US\$22.95 (pbk)

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Reforming New Orleans: The Contentious Politics of Change in the Big Easy examines the ways in which Hurricane Katrina triggered changes in governance, politics and policy in the city of New Orleans. Through the conceptual lenses of ‘political arrangements’ and ‘policy agenda fidelity’, the authors set out to explore the ways extra- local actors and reform-oriented players have used their resources and authority to change pre-Katrina governance configurations and introduce new policy orientations. By focusing on four policy areas – economic development, public education, housing and public safety – the authors explore the dynamics of governmental and political reconstruction, flesh out winners and losers and conclude by providing an understanding of the conditions under which emerging interests hold potential in supplanting the deep-seated ones.

A short introductory section sets out the centrality of the two main concepts of the book; first, the ‘political arrangement’ which is understood as a ‘body of relationships that gives a city its policy-making character... [and] distinguishes actual governance from the institutions of government’; and second the ‘policy agenda fidelity’, ‘which is viewed as the degree to which a political arrangement is able to promote and execute an agenda over time’ (p. 4).

Chapter 1 provides a general description of the New Orleans’ pre-Katrina political and governance landscape of which the persistent political dysfunction is particularly stressed. In the subsequent chapters, the authors structure their main discussion around the aforementioned four policy areas. The public agenda for each area is examined in both pre- and post-Katrina periods. More specifically, Chapter 2 examines the economic development policy in the city. Chapters 3 and 4 study public education policy. Chapter 3 examines the ways state-level actors and business leaders set the scene for reforms in public education prior to the storm, whereas Chapter 4 deals with the intensification of change in public education and stresses the role of extra-local actors. Chapter 5 provides the reader with an overview of policy-making in the housing arena, particularly focusing on public housing, the notorious ‘Road Home’ program and the topical issue of blight, while Chapter 6 observes the least-reformed policy area, that of public safety.

The special contribution of the book is that it grants equal value and attention to the two periods that characterise the recent history of New Orleans, namely those of before and after Hurricane Katrina. To my knowledge, few books – if any – have embarked on such an endeavour. The historical and cultural contextualisation of post- Katrina policy and governance changes, hence, provides an informed background against which we can better analyse various governance tensions and power relations that ultimately have guided policy trajectories and sketched the current socio-political and physical profile of the city. Of special interest is the detailed description of changes in four policy areas which are particularly pertinent in any post-disaster context. This discussion, even though often fairly descriptive and less analytical, manages to deliver a more concrete and down-to-earth analysis of post-disaster governance tensions often missed out in the urban disaster literature.

I particularly enjoyed the impressive grasp the authors hold of the New Orleans context. The book is rich in historical references and information, an obvious result of an industrious collection of extensive data. Peter F Burns and Matthew O Thomas indeed capture eloquently the identity of the pre-Katrina status quo and the long- standing patterns of corruption, patronage and mismanagement that characterised the city institutions and officials prior to the storm.

Without shying away from disclosing names of individuals and institutions, the authors have exhaustively presented the key, and more empowered, actors influencing the four policy areas in post-Katrina New Orleans. According to the authors, the empowerment of these actors was essentially premised on their capacity to gain access to authority and/or resources. This is precisely where the compelling argument developed by the authors of this book lies: ‘disasters are windows of opportunity (namely political change) when they affect resources and authority. To understand post-disaster governance... one must identify the actors who control the resources and authority necessary to set the agenda and enact policy’ (p. 151). This means that change occurs when the pre-disaster status quo suffers from discredited institutions and resource depletion, allowing space for new power conglomerations – consisting mainly of extra-local governmental authorities, foundations and private actors – to take over the control of policies. This argument sounds particularly convincing, even though not particularly novel. Nevertheless, the authors bring fresh air in the disaster scholarship with their focus on governance dynamics, and maybe also implicitly keep power relations and socio-institutional dynamics alive in the analysis of post-disaster urban affairs. And this is the real heart of the book, which beats strongly in the very dense and remarkably detailed empirical chapters.

However, the heartbeat loses a little rhythm when it comes to the conceptual framework that guides this book. Even though I found the concept of ‘political arrangement’ very useful and enlightening, in my opinion it is not sufficiently elaborated. Using the limited space of a few pages in the introductory chapter to present their conceptual framework, the authors missed the opportunity to situate their concept within larger academic discourses, such as that of disaster resilience. It would have been much more stimulating – intellectually speaking – if for example the authors had used the concept of ‘political arrangement’ and the importance of authority and resources to better inform or clarify the notion of resilience. Current open questions that remain partly unanswered are: resilience of whom? Which groups in society are better armed in imposing their own understanding and implementation of resilience? Whose resilience qualities are more enhanced and whose are wasted? The urban disaster scholarship is in urgent need of empirical data that would give more convincing, evidence-based answers to these questions. And this book definitely holds great potential in becoming an active participant in this dialogue.

Partly due to this absence of a stronger conceptual framework, and an over-reliance on (maybe too) exhaustive empirical data, the key insights and conclusions drawn together in the last chapter – no matter how convincing they might be – they still remain superficially linked to theoretical arguments. In particular, the contention by the authors at the very end of the book that the post-Katrina new political arrangements ‘do not mean that the city is better off ’ (p. 161) opens up a whole new intellectual debate around socially optimal governance modalities, the role of intra-level government in orchestrating socially just urban outcomes and the identity of modern urban democracy. Therefore, my appetite for more theoretical reflections, or at least for a cohesive statement of a future research agenda, was unfortunately not satisfied as I was reaching the end of the book. However, the authors definitely planted some seeds, and certainly have delivered their promise to provide the conditions under which political change can occur in post-disaster contexts.

To conclude, I believe that Burns and Thomas have written a well-researched and well-documented book. I want to again emphasise the quality of the research conducted and the way the authors put the case study – with its unique history, cultural particularities and socio-economic complexities – into perspective. The originality of the approach that gives due attention to power and politics in both the pre- and post-Katrina periods undoubtedly gives real added value. To my mind, this is definitely a book for the library bookshelf. It will be a critical resource for academics, researchers and practitioners in the field of disasters, urban politics and urban sociology. Therefore, I warmly recommend the reading of this very informative and timely book.