

## Book review

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Renaud Le Goix, *Sur le front de la métropole: Une géographie suburbaine de Los Angeles*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016; 318 pp.: 978-2-85944-965-0, €34.00 (pbk)

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In May 2020, the US Labour Department announced that over 20.5 million workers lost their jobs because of the effects of COVID-19 – a rate of unemployment unseen since the Great Depression. The following month, in June, the National Association of Realtors reported that existing home sales in the USA had grown by 20.7%, the largest monthly increase on record, while nearly 1.2 million privately owned housing starts were added to the national supply (a mere 4% decline from the previous year).

These figures belie the degree to which economic wellbeing depends not only upon asset-based wealth accumulation across all strata of society, but also what befalls a person or household on the ‘property ladder’ once a crisis strikes. Increasingly today, these events and the inequalities they reinforce, manifest at the frontiers of urban growth and change.

The frontier has long been a concept that theorists have employed to illuminate the socio-spatial transformation of urban environments. While, indeed, the metaphor serves as a useful heuristic device, Renaud Le Goix, in his latest book, *Sur le front de la métropole (On the Edge of the Metropolis)*,

makes the case for what one might call ‘frontier as method’. Put differently, the edge of the metropolis is a site replete with contradictions, ambiguities and uncertainties that offer conceptual and methodological challenges for doing urban research. As a result, fundamental knowledge about how crises unfold across urban regions and how they shape the geography of inequality is a persistently incomplete question. Le Goix advocates instead for the development of methodological techniques with which to measure and model the restless urban landscape.

The focus of his study is the greater Los Angeles region: a vast region extending nearly 300 km over seven southern California counties (Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Ventura, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara) and 22 million inhabitants. A reader would be right to ask what another study of Los Angeles could offer the well-trodden field. Le Goix does not disappoint. His vantage from within the French academy offers remarkably novel insight into the region and wider urban studies, especially for those less familiar with francophone geography.

Foremost, the book’s contribution is not to theoretical inventiveness as one would typically expect from an anglophone text. French geography has a much stronger orientation towards interdisciplinary, methodological innovation – especially in spatial analyses that bridge data sets to generate original insight into known concepts or

processes. Indeed, Le Goix develops a 'transversal analysis' across space and time, drawn from his experience analysing real estate markets and segregation dynamics across both the USA and France.

The book makes the case for building upon the classic factorial ecology framework by incorporating a stronger emphasis on the relationships between three types of data: the subdivision (*lotissement*), the institutional governance structure of that sub-division (e.g. property owners associations) and the temporal trajectories of the social, economic and demographic phenomena therein. In doing so, the author illuminates not only the components that allow researchers to better discern relatively distinct and coherent landscapes across LA's heterogeneous urban fabric, but also the underlying drivers of wealth accumulation and deprivation that play out across the region, 'including in the more ordinary, intermediate spaces of sub-urban and post-suburban life' (p. 11).

Three key conclusions are reached:

1. The subdivision in its legal and functional expression is where 'everything converges', but the principal factors shaping socio-spatial inequality do not affect the same neighbourhoods equally. Economic factors tend to be the prevailing driver of inequality in areas closer to urban centres, while peripheral areas tend to be influenced by differences in the age, lifecycle and ethno-racial composition of the residents. Scalar differences are equally important: Le Goix observes that age and income are the primary factors driving socio-spatial inequalities across the wider metropolitan region, while ethno-racial segregation tends to be more influential at a more local level.
2. The regulatory and financial structure of a subdivision plays a crucial role in shaping the long-term expression of

socio-spatial inequalities across the LA region. Specifically, Le Goix concludes (p. 268) that the average price of residential property in a subdivision can be explained thus: 14% depends on the characteristics of the property; 26% of the value can be attributed to the characteristics of the subdivision (local amenities, gated streets, maintenance systems, neighbourhood improvements); and 60% depends on factors associated with the structure of local governance in place (incorporated and unincorporated areas, home-owners associations, school districts, etc.).

3. Socio-spatial inequality is not simply defined by one's access and inclusion in the residential property market (i.e. the first stage in asset-based welfare), but by the longer-term trajectories of valuation in and across a subdivision. In particular, Le Goix demonstrates that the *pace* and *degree* to which housing wealth accumulates or depreciates over time, has a significant impact on locking-in the long-term economic wellbeing of households.


Ultimately, these considerations cast light on a number of assumptions urban theorists have held regarding the production of inequality at the edge of metropolitan Los Angeles. Le Goix's transversal analytical approach both clarifies and deepens many of the more speculative claims advanced by urban theorists, especially from the LA School and its legacy. I am, however, disappointed that more theoretical engagement was not developed with the LA School in the final chapter of the book, which is more of a summary of the main points discussed throughout the other chapters. Some of the most interesting sections in the book occur when Le Goix touches on the epistemological and disciplinary differences between French and Anglo-American geography,

and what this means for theoretical understandings of urban growth and change. The book would have benefited from an elaboration of the tensions between the two fields, drawing more on the author's conceptual reference points, such as Marcel Roncayolo and Alain Lipietz as they relate to his engagements with anglophone geography and urban studies.

That said, the study offers uncommon insight into ongoing debates on global (sub)urbanisation, the sociology and geography of inequality, and the political

economy of housing, whose implications have only grown in the present conjuncture. The methodological approaches developed in this work are essential for anyone looking to read a novel, international-comparative perspective on urbanisation from the USA.

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