The geopolitics of real estate: reconfiguring property, capital and rights

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BOOK REVIEW


The various crises of land, housing and property around the world attract plenty of popular and academic attention in the form of (more-or-less) detailed analyses of local and contemporary conditions. Rarely, however, do these examinations undertake to situate local, contemporary crises within their complex historical-geopolitical contexts. In The Geopolitics of Real Estate, Dallas Rogers has sought to do this. The book provides compelling analyses of the accumulation and evolution of the organising logics and technologies of global(ised) real estate investment, traversing multiple historical and geographical junctures in demonstrating how land and real estate are shaped and reshaped by geopolitical moments.

Rogers’ particular geopolitical lens focuses upon the ‘ground level’ experience of power and knowledge structures (13). It is guided by the meta-concepts of semblance and assemblage: 16 vignettes—global real estate semblances—are unpacked to show the organising technics (Chapters 3 and 4), mediating technologies (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) and discursive codes (Chapters 6 and 7) of land and real estate in different ‘epochs’. Assembling the semblances in the final chapter, Rogers underscores three ‘subterranean themes’: the influence of collective land and real estate mentalities on geopolitical practices; the entrenching of prevailing organising technics of land and real estate at moments of crisis; and the shaping of land and real estate claiming by geopolitics. In its schematic use of semblances and assemblage, Geopolitics takes inspiration from A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Some critics may feel that the book does not sufficiently engage Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical ruminations; however, this makes Geopolitics more comprehensible for readers who are not intimately familiar with, or who are put off by, post-structuralist theory.

Rogers establishes Indigenous dispossession as the context that enframes geopolitics in the settler-colonial societies at the centre of Geopolitics. This is critically important given Rogers’ vantage point of Sydney. While debates about housing in Sydney are heated, and commonplace, they are too rarely enframed within the original and ongoing act of Indigenous dispossession. This leads in to a vignette of an aspiring anti-multiculturalism politician who distributed pamphlets around Sydney claiming that the ‘invasion’ of Chinese real estate purchasers is creating a dispossessed ‘stolen generation’. Rather than dismissing the story of the pamphleteer as an isolated incident of xenophobia (as most did at the time), Rogers argues convincingly that this colonising of the discourse of Indigenous dispossession is demonstrative of the present structure of settler colonialism and its geopolitics of ‘claiming, regulating and protecting land’ through real estate (4). Here are the two key anchoring points of Rogers’ analysis of the geopolitics of real estate: settler colonialism on the one hand, and the rise of extremely wealthy, often foreign, real estate investors—from Asia in particular—on the other.

Despite its brevity—its eight chapters constitute 163 pages—Geopolitics gives a rich account of its subject matter. Chapters 3 and 4 centre on the organising technics of land: the ‘rules of knowledge production and the technological tools that are employed within an embodied action’ (24). The first words on this are given to Indigenous Australians, whose organising technics endure and continue to underwrite ongoing storylines alongside settlers’ rational-legal organising technic of private property. Rogers elaborates on this rational-legal technic that led to the
enclosure of the English commons and which was eventually ‘globally mobilised through various colonial projects’ (65). Here, legal mediating technologies assembled parcels of land ‘within legal documents alongside the rational-legal mentalities that are needed to decipher and police the legal texts’, and embodied mediating technologies ‘assemble[d] human bodies with surveying tools and surveying mentalities’ (69–70) to appropriate the land of colonised Indigenous peoples.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Rogers traces the creation of ‘property-owning democracies’ out of these settler societies. The nation-state is here configured as a once radical new organising technic that enabled the distribution of property—initially given away, later sold through private markets. The distribution of property forged citizen bodies into a technology of state power; and mass migration from Europe provided more citizen bodies to whom property could be distributed. In property-owning democracies, writes Rogers, ‘home-making was constructed and promoted as an act of citizen- and nation-building’ in a discursive tactic linking the industrial body and home (112). The inculcation of a mentality that ‘life would be better if you can get into the real estate market’ (100) built the Great Australian Dream—now a nightmare for many—which Rogers argues became ‘a collective mentality that was manifesting as an assumed right, perhaps even a duty to the settler state, that Australians should own real estate’ (121).

In Chapters 6 and 7, Rogers illuminates the similarities between the discursive tactics of real estate professionals in the 1990s—tactics which were responding to and reproducing the Great Australian Dream—and contemporary ‘embodied and techno-discursive technologies’ of today’s global real estate professionals (135). Rogers argues that the past tactics and technologies of real estate professionals are being scaled up—geographically, electronically and socio-economically—to target the growth in the number of extremely wealthy individuals and of global real estate investment (141). Rogers concludes by gazing towards this new global real estate industry and offering the somewhat bleak, though perhaps unsurprising, assessment that the industry ‘is building a translocal network that draws on many of the organising technics, real estate mentalities, knowledge systems, and real estate practices that created significant housing inequity over a long timeline’ (163).

There are, however, some glimpses of alternative forms of digital real estate technics; Rogers mentions the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and Our House Swap, and there are others besides (e.g. Airbnb vs Berlin, Boston Displacement Mapping Project, Displacement Alert Project). An exploration of these alternatives may be beyond the conceptual scope of the book; however, in terms of a normative political agenda, further examination of the counter-mentalities that underlie these digital platforms would have been welcome, and the relative brevity of Geopolitics leaves the reader with still some appetite that could be sated in such a way. There are also some conspicuous absences in the book—a function of its focus upon settler societies—and though Rogers gives recognition to these (35–39), one is left wondering how, for example, land mentalities that developed in Russia figure in a contemporary geopolitics of real estate. These are, however, minor criticisms; what they reflect is the immensely engaging and illuminating quality of the book, and a desire for more. The Geopolitics of Real Estate has the potential to reshape the way in which geographers and housing scholars approach property and real estate and would serve as a valuable reference for those thinking about land, housing and property in settler societies and elsewhere.

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