The Geopolitics of Real Estate: Reconfiguring Property, Capital and Rights

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BOOK REVIEW

The Geopolitics of Real Estate: Reconfiguring Property, Capital and Rights
Dallas Rogers

Trading in real estate, whether our goal in doing so is to realize its use value or its exchange value, requires a particular way of thinking about land and property and our relationship to them. Whether we call that way of thinking “discourse” or “mentality” or some other term, it functions because we don’t look at it or think about it very often. In this original, compelling and scholarly book, Dallas Rogers pulls it into view through an empirical analysis of 16 of its “semblances”. He refers to these as “vignettes”, which implies the reader could selectively skim them, focussing only on those of particular interest, but this is a book that should be read from beginning to end. Not all the vignettes are equally convincing or successful, but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and the effect and contribution is cumulative.

The theoretical discussion in Chapter 2 is the most complex section of the book. Here, Rogers draws on an impressive range and depth of reading to assemble an analytical framework incorporating three “conceptual registers”, described, respectively, as “organising technics”, “mediating technologies” and “discursive codes”, and two “meta-concepts”, “semblance” and “assemblage”, accounts of which book-end the other chapters, and which sit in constant and unresolved tension throughout. The vignettes make up the body of the book – respectively, Australian Indigenous storylines; enclosure; the Chinese cultural revolution; British colonialism; the colonial joint-stock company; surveying; the colonial nation state; banks and banking; migration; post-war consumerism; real estate “self-help” books; investment visas; the emergence of the internet; its underpinning libertarian “ideological landscape”; and the “uploading” of real estate to Web 2.0. Within and through these vignettes, Rogers lays out the evidence for his main contentions: that “the geopolitical practices of land and real estate are heavily reliant on collective land and real estate mentalities” (156) that are deeply embedded and resistant to change, that these mentalities are not challenged by crisis but reinforced by it, and that geopolitical “moments” (161) – like feudalism, colonialism, war, post-war reconstruction and now the rise of China – are the determining conditions from which temporally and spatially situated real estate assemblages emerge.

Rogers’ explicit and confident engagement with theory is the great strength of the book. Housing and urban scholars do excellent empirical work, much of it responding to the demand for “policy relevance”, but one of the privileges and strengths of academia is that empirical analysis can be situated within a theoretical context that lends it greater explanatory power. It is theory that allows Rogers to successfully
[challenge] the claim that we can attribute blame for the collective effects of the globalisation of real estate to one set of actors, at one moment in time, over another set of actors at the same or a different moment in time. (18)

Contemporary “problems” like the inflationary effects of foreign real estate investment in 2017, are attributable to more than surplus Chinese capital, he shows, and by implication, solutions must extend beyond vacancy taxes and stamp duty surcharges.

When discussing theory and concepts, Rogers’ terminology is eclectic and sometimes cumbersome. Given that the aim is to draw attention to what we usually do not see because it is treated as self-evident, this is not necessarily a problem and may even be an advantage; it is the literary equivalent of printing a stencil at eye level on a glass door to prevent people from crashing into it. That said, I would ask why Rogers has chosen to use words like “truth” and “reality” (e.g. 2, 18–19) in a book premised at least partly on the contingencies of knowledge. Similarly, I found his account of the body “as a mobile mediating technology” (74) unconvincing. I think a more fitting term in place of “body” would have been “subjectivity”. A subjectivity is of course attached to and a constituent of a body, and in a sense “body” anchors us to this corporeality in a way that the more abstract “subject” does not. But repeated references to bodies and embodiment nonetheless imply a more material, tangible process than is generally described here.

There are also points where the theoretical integrity falters and the analysis shifts to a political economic mode. This is particularly obvious in the section on the transition from feudal land mentalities to notions of private property in land (48–52). Here Rogers depicts enclosure, via a recital of legislative change, as profit-seeking by landed gentry, and although he argues all of this “helped to create a land claiming mentality” (52), he gives limited attention to how it did so. Similarly, where Rogers discusses real estate as a twenty-first century version of “bread and circuses” (155), he implies a form of governmental agency that is situated outside the organizing technic, rather than embedded within it, whereas a more consistent interpretation would see the institutions of government as unstable and heterogeneous assemblages in their own right.

None of these weaknesses are fatal – I thought the book was excellent, though it is a book for readers already immersed in similar empirical and theoretical territory, rather than an introductory text or a book directed at students. For scholars in housing and urban studies and their associated disciplines – urban planning, human geography, housing economics – it offers a fascinating account of the geopolitics of land. More generally, readers interested in the development and application of innovative social theory may also find much to enjoy. Its most important contribution, however, is the way in which Rogers returns repeatedly and convincingly to the “context of all contexts” (157) – colonialism and colonialists’ dispossession of Indigenous people.

Earlier this year, Australian Indigenous people, meeting for the First Nations National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, released their “statement from the heart”, declaring that their sovereignty “has never been ceded or extinguished”, and calling for “Makarrata”, a treaty, as “the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle” (Referendum Council 2017; emphasis in original). As much as anything, this struggle has been about land. Non-Indigenous Australians find the “work” of talking about race overwhelmingly difficult, suggests the
journalist Harmon (2017). Rogers’ analysis, from a different theoretical standpoint, nonetheless confirms her argument: that this is because we are simply unable to viscerally confront colonialism as a process that is still in motion. This is a situated reaction (I am a white Australian), but another conclusion that emerges from Rogers’ analysis is that the dominant land mentalities of more than just “the colonies” are also inextricably tangled with and implicated in colonialism and colonial injustice, which means this is an issue for all of us.

References


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