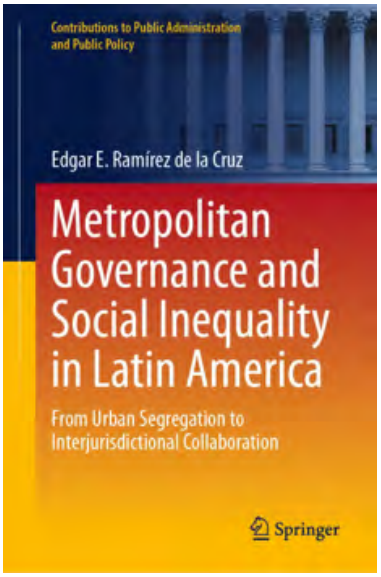
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Book review:

Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America: From Urban Segregation to Interjurisdictional Collaboration

Edgar E. Ramírez de la Cruz · Springer, 2026 · 139 pages.

Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America offers a timely and conceptually ambitious contribution to the study of metropolitan governance, interjurisdictional collaboration, and urban inequality in Latin America. The book begins by identifying a fundamental paradox of contemporary metropolitan areas: while cities increasingly function as integrated economic, social, and territorial units, their political and administrative structures remain fragmented among multiple jurisdictions. This separation between the functional reality of the metropolis and the formal boundaries of governments constitutes what the author calls the "metropolitan problem." Its consequences include coordination problems, inefficiencies in service delivery, difficulties in realizing economies of scale, and, of particular importance to the book's argument, territorial inequalities in access to public goods and services.

The book positions social inequality within the traditional debate on metropolitan governance and development. On the one hand, a long tradition has advocated local government consolidation or the creation of metropolitan authorities to address problems arising from fragmentation. On the other hand, the

public choice tradition has emphasized the potential advantages of fragmented and polycentric systems, including competition among governments and the ability to tailor public services to the preferences of different communities. Rather than accepting this dichotomy, the book focuses on social inequality, metropolitan governance, and interjurisdictional collaboration. Metropolitan governance is not conceived as a single, stable structure but as a dynamic set of formal and informal institutions, organizational structures, administrative processes, managerial practices, and networks through which governmental and nongovernmental actors attempt to address issues extending beyond the boundaries of any single jurisdiction.

This definition represents one of the book's conceptual strengths. It allows the analysis to move beyond the search for an ideal institutional model of metropolitan government and instead concentrate on the conditions under which actors decide to collaborate. The relevant question is no longer simply which structure should govern a metropolitan area, but rather how, why, and under what conditions actors with different resources, competencies, interests, and jurisdictions construct mechanisms for collective action.

To address this question, the book uses the institutional collective action (ICA) framework as its theoretical starting point. ICA interprets many metropolitan problems as collective action dilemmas that emerge when the boundaries of public problems do not coincide with the boundaries of the jurisdictions responsible for addressing them. Governments may benefit from cooperation, but they must bear decision, negotiation, monitoring, and autonomy costs. The selection of an integration mechanism consequently depends on transaction costs and the risks associated with collaboration.

The book, however, does not simply apply ICA to Latin American cases. Its most interesting contribution is its critical reconsideration of the framework's assumptions in light of Latin American political and institutional conditions. The argument is that some implicit assumptions underlying ICA reflect the institutional conditions of the United States and Western Europe and therefore require reconsideration. These include the existence of a relatively strong rule of law, the primacy of formal rules, sufficient local administrative capacity, governments' ability to interact directly with external stakeholders, and the expectation that governments primarily seek efficiency and autonomy.

The Latin American cases reveal a considerably more complex reality. Informal institutions, clientelistic relationships, fiscal inequalities, differences in administrative capacity, party structures, economic informality, and historical trajectories of centralization affect both incentives and

actual opportunities for collaboration. The book does not reject ICA but seeks to expand its explanatory capacity by incorporating dimensions insufficiently addressed in its traditional applications.

The concept of collaboration risk is particularly important in Latin American countries. Interjurisdictional cooperation involves uncertainty: participants may fail to honor agreements, free-ride on the efforts of others, disagree over the distribution of costs and benefits, or appropriate the results of collaboration for political purposes. The book broadens this notion by demonstrating that these risks are not merely organizational or economic. They are also political. Mayors, governors, public officials, and other actors consider how collaboration might alter their careers, reputations, resources, and ability to claim credit for policy outcomes. The decision to collaborate thus becomes both a technical and a political calculation. In other words, metropolitan governance is shaped by distributive conflict as much as by efficiency concerns.

The comparative analysis of Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Santiago, and São Paulo provides the empirical foundation for developing this argument. The case selection is particularly useful because these large urban areas share problems of territorial fragmentation, sociospatial inequality, informal settlements, mobility, infrastructure, and unequal service provision, while operating under different constitutional structures, administrative traditions, and political trajectories. The purpose of the comparison is not to identify a single successful model but to demonstrate how different combinations of institutions, actors, and problems generate different forms of metropolitan governance.

The cases also demonstrate the importance of history. Much of Latin America's metropolitan development occurred under conditions of strong political centralization and, in some cases, authoritarian rule. Under those circumstances, national or state governments could informally perform metropolitan coordination functions. Democratization and decentralization increased autonomy and political pluralism, but, paradoxically, also made coordination problems more visible. Electoral competition, divided governments, and partisan rivalry increased the political risks associated with cooperation. Democratization therefore did not eliminate the metropolitan problem; rather, it fundamentally changed the conditions under which it must be addressed.

One particularly provocative contribution is the book's questioning of the assumption that actors always seek to maximize autonomy. In contexts where new responsibilities are not accompanied by sufficient resources or administrative capacity, acquiring jurisdiction over a complex problem may represent a political liability rather than a source of power. A government may prefer not to assume responsibility for housing, poverty, or other difficult problems if it will subsequently

be held accountable for outcomes it cannot control. In contrast, functions such as transportation or infrastructure may be politically attractive because they are associated with greater resources and visibility. Jurisdiction should not be understood solely as formal authority but as a resource whose value depends on the benefits, costs, and risks associated with a particular public issue.

Social and territorial inequality occupies a central place in this explanation. This is perhaps one of the elements that most clearly distinguishes the book from much of the traditional literature on metropolitan governance. Fragmentation does not merely produce efficiency problems; it also enables wealthier jurisdictions and social groups to distance themselves from the costs associated with regional problems. Fiscal and socioeconomic differences increase the political risks of collaboration when residents of wealthier municipalities perceive cooperation as subsidizing less affluent jurisdictions. Inequality, in this sense, is not merely an outcome of deficient governance; it is also an obstacle to constructing the collaboration required to address it.

This observation allows the book to connect two bodies of literature that frequently develop separately: scholarship on collective action and institutional efficiency and scholarship concerned with urban equity. Effective metropolitan governance requires reducing transaction costs and constructing a shared understanding of urban difficulties. When inequality of opportunity is defined as a metropolitan problem, it becomes possible to argue that addressing it is a collective responsibility rather than a problem exclusive to poorer jurisdictions.

This leads to another important contribution: attention to the framing of public problems. Before actors decide how to collaborate, they must recognize that a problem requires interjurisdictional action. The book proposes a three-stage process: collectively identifying a problem as metropolitan; assessing the risks and benefits of collaboration; and evaluating the transaction costs associated with potential institutional mechanisms. This sequence introduces a political dimension that complements more institutionalist explanations of cooperation.

Policy entrepreneurs, professional organizations, civil society, and epistemic communities consequently become especially important. These actors can produce and codify knowledge, construct metropolitan narratives, and demonstrate that apparently local problems—such as transportation, pollution, housing, or inequality—have regional causes and consequences. Metropolitan governance, therefore, depends not only on institutional design but also on the ability to construct a collective understanding of the metropolis as a shared space.

The book also identifies significant limitations in the cases examined. The absence of a con-

solidated metropolitan identity, inequalities among jurisdictions, differences in administrative capacity, partisan rivalries, and the persistence of informal institutions all complicate cooperation. At the same time, crises may create opportunities to temporarily overcome these barriers. Problems such as pollution, congestion, natural disasters, or public health emergencies reveal interdependence among jurisdictions and can generate sector-specific mechanisms of cooperation that may subsequently provide foundations for broader metropolitan arrangements.

The book calls for research on how metropolitan identities can be developed and how participatory mechanisms can better incorporate groups that have traditionally been excluded from regional decision-making processes.

Future research should prioritize examining the interrelated questions of legitimacy, accountability, and representativeness of metropolitan authorities. There is also a need to better understand the interaction between formal and informal institutions, analyze the effects of partisan competition and electoral cycles, examine the role of policy entrepreneurs, and explore fiscal mechanisms capable of reconciling efficiency and equity.

From a critical perspective, one of the book's principal strengths is that it avoids treating the Latin American experience as a deviation from institutional models developed in the Global North. Instead, it uses Latin American cases to reexamine and extend existing theories. Informality, inequality, power asymmetries, historical centralization, and institutional weakness cease to appear merely as "contextual variables" and instead become integral components of the theoretical explanation of metropolitan collective action.

At the same time, this effort raises questions that could be developed further. If metropolitan governance is understood as the dynamic aggregation of multiple collaborations, future research will need instruments capable of assessing not only when these collaborations emerge but also when they produce better outcomes and for whom. A collaboration may be institutionally stable and efficient without necessarily reducing metropolitan inequalities. Likewise, incorporating private actors and civil society organizations raises important questions concerning representation, legitimacy, and accountability that deserve further attention.

Overall, Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America makes a valuable contribution to public administration, urban governance, intergovernmental relations, and metropolitan policy studies. Its principal merit lies in shifting the discussion away from the search for an ideal metropolitan government structure and toward the political and institutional processes

through which fragmented actors construct—or fail to construct—collective responses. By placing inequality, informal institutions, and the political risks of collaboration at the center of the analysis, the book provides a particularly relevant perspective for understanding Latin America's large metropolitan areas. More broadly, it advances an argument whose implications extend beyond the region: understanding metropolitan governance requires examining not only the institutions available for collaboration but also who has incentives to use them, who bears their costs, who receives their benefits, and how societies come to recognize particular problems as shared metropolitan responsibilities.

Acerca del autor

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