



## BOOK REVIEW

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Scott Cowen with Betsy Seifter, *The Inevitable City: The Resurgence of New Orleans and the Future of Urban America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Described by former Tulane University President Scott Cowen as both a community revitalization story and a book about leadership, Cowen's memoir *The Inevitable City* explores New Orleans in the decade since Hurricane Katrina. Following the introduction, each of the ten chapters is organized around a leadership principle: 1, "Hard Calls: Do the Right Thing"; 2, "Chocolate City: Seek Common Ground"; 3, "The City That Care Forgot: Marshal Facts"; 4, "The Problem We All Live With: Understand Reality"; 5, "Make It Right: Aim High"; 6, "Fight, Fight, Fight: Stand Up for Your Beliefs"; 7, "Grow Dat: Make Contact"; 8, "Inflection Point: Innovate"; 9, "Let the Good Times Roll: Embrace Emotion"; and 10, "Doing Good: Be True to Your Core Values." The chapters are loosely chronological as well as thematic. They begin with the city flooding and Cowen's work to rebuild Tulane and then briefly cover a wide range of subjects from the planning processes, municipal leadership, education reform, healthcare, housing redevelopment, youth-oriented programs, and social entrepreneurship.

The memoir's objective can be summarized as explaining "what is leadership, and why does it matter?" (p. 6). The chapters that describe Cowen's direct engagement, such as getting Tulane University reestablished (Chapter 1) and planning for education reform (Chapter 4), best show Cowen's actions and self-reflection. Tulane University is a powerful institution in New Orleans, as Cowen explains in the introduction, and a decade later enrollments are up and the university is stronger. Tulane's recovery and influence in the city are interesting dimensions of *The Inevitable City*.

As a memoir intending to convey leadership advice, the book tells community revitalization stories to highlight particular individuals. Much of the book focuses on Cowen's views on the resurgence of New Orleans rather than his role in it, and Cowen describes others people's activities and projects to make his leadership points. Cowen repeatedly asserts that he believes in individuals rather than organizations. Celebrities are commended for their inspiration, work, or talent. The Dalai Lama, Ruby Bridges, Sandra Bullock, Brad Pitt, Bon Jovi, Irvin Mayfield, and Trombone Shorty (among many others) appear in the star-studded text. The directors of such organizations as the urban farming and youth empowerment-oriented Grow Dat and those he considers the local leaders who address citywide issues also receive attention. However, Cowen's explanations for his actions—"one thing I'm good at is saying yes to a good idea" (p. 131)—are often overly short with inadequate reflection on the challenges of leadership or information about tradeoffs, decision making, or the work it took to get the job done.

*The Inevitable City* conveys a bifurcated view of the city, in which some people are helping and others helped. The attention is on the actions of the privileged elite. The lower income residents and disadvantaged youth whose lives are being changed appear alongside as the beneficiaries. At the same time, in Chapter 3 and throughout the book, Cowen emphasizes in detail how the violence that kills too many youth, poor school performance, and an inability to earn sufficient wages to move out of public housing are effects of structural forces. Because of this, *The Inevitable City* is reasonably free of rhetoric that blames inequality on those who fare the worse in inequitable circumstances.

Unfortunately, the structural framing does not extend to reflecting on the workings of privilege and power, even though on this Cowen's position could offer insight unavailable to other observers.

The leaders depicted are predominantly white members of the city's elites with whom Cowen meets on various issues, as well as the celebrities and the social entrepreneurs. At times, Cowen recounts differing views held by ordinary residents, but he appears unaware why elite decision making or the view of New Orleans as a blank slate after the post-hurricane flooding spawned mistrust. Likewise, he gives no explanation why he considered his "friends" Jimmy Reiss and Joe Canizaro "unfairly slammed" in 2005 and 2006 for suggesting the city would change demographically or had a clean slate (p. 34), yet he criticizes former Mayor Ray Nagin for being divisive when he made his widely discussed "Chocolate City" speech (Chapter 2). With few details about organizational development, urban politics, or decision making, *The Inevitable City* offers little insight about politics in New Orleans.

Instead, the book supports a popular narrative of urban change that envisions gentrifying cities rebuilt by and for middle-class residents. Integrated schools and mixed-income housing rather than racial or social justice appear to be the intended outcome. Given the length of the text and breadth of topics, projects, and organizations covered, each only receives cursory discussion. The subjects are familiar and the perspectives unsurprising. For example, Cowen believes that public housing "had to go" (p. 124) and he celebrates the entrepreneurial spirit of a pedicab company founder (p. 161). Outcomes are rarely discussed and, when mentioned, a statistic or two stand in for analysis. Because of this, the book's contribution as a text about urban change might be limited for the audience of *Journal of Urban Affairs* given the wealth of recent scholarship on the rebuilding of New Orleans and urban change. Among others, Karl Seidman's *Coming Home to New Orleans: Neighborhood Rebuilding after Katrina* (2013), John Arena's *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (2012), and Michael Eugene Crutcher's *Treme: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (2010) address related topics.

Nevertheless, *The Inevitable City* is readable and engaging. While the story of "the resurgence of New Orleans and the future of urban America" can be seen as a story about privilege and "doing good" (Chapter 10), this too is one of many possible stories about post-Katrina New Orleans. As an account that affirms rather than analyzes the workings of privilege, the subject of *The Inevitable City*—the visible and invisible elites and the creative class "social innovators"—also may be its primary audience.

## REFERENCES

- Arena, J. (2012). *Driven from New Orleans: How nonprofits betray public housing and promote privatization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
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