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Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2025

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BOOK REVIEW

The politics of sanctuary, by Vojislava Filipcevic Cordes, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2025

Vojislava Filipcevic Cordes's *The Politics of Sanctuary* asks a deceptively simple question: what does it mean for a city to offer sanctuary when national governments retain authority over immigration and citizenship? Cordes's answer moves sanctuary beyond municipal declarations and noncooperation policies to the political practices through which undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and their allies claim protection, presence, and membership in the city. Drawing on participant observation with New York City's New Sanctuary Coalition (NSC), Cordes argues that sanctuary can create alternative forms of urban citizenship grounded in presence and participation rather than formal national status or official city policies. Yet the book resists the familiar claim that cities are inherently more cosmopolitan or progressive than nation-states. Cities remain constrained by federal and state authority, limited redistributive capacity, racialized policing, housing inequality, privatization, and growth-oriented development. Sanctuary consequently represents a possibility rather than an accomplished condition: it can create spaces of political inclusion and "rightful presence," but it cannot by itself undo the structural inequalities that shape urban life. This tension between the city as a site of exclusion and as an arena in which alternative forms of membership can be constructed is what makes *The Politics of Sanctuary* particularly relevant to urban studies.

The book develops this argument across an introduction, six chapters organized into three parts, and a conclusion. The introduction situates sanctuary within the tension between the limits of national migration governance and the possibilities, and constraints, of cities as sites of immigrant inclusion. Part I, "The Politics of Immigrant Exclusion," establishes the historical and institutional context. Chapter 1 examines how ostensibly neutral traditions of urban planning have reproduced classed, racialized, and nativist exclusions, while Chapter 2 turns to the criminalization of immigrants and grassroots resistance to "crimmigration." Part II, "The Politics of Sanctuary Cities," moves into urban theory. Chapter 3 interrogates the limits of city sovereignty, questioning celebratory accounts of empowered cities by asking whether greater municipal authority actually produces more equitable outcomes. Chapter 4 shifts from formal policy to political spaces created through grassroots practices such as accompaniment, legal advocacy, and neighborhood-based "Sanctuary Hoods." Part III, "Rights and Justice," extends these arguments theoretically. Chapter 5 interprets sanctuary through civil disobedience, denizenship, co-citizenship, and solidarity, while Chapter 6 connects sanctuary to Lefebvrian debates about the right to the city. The conclusion brings these strands together through a cautiously optimistic vision of urban democracy in which citizens and noncitizens can jointly make political claims while acknowledging the institutional and material constraints on such politics.

The book's first major contribution to urban studies is its refusal to romanticize the local. Much contemporary scholarship and policy discourse presents cities as pragmatic and cosmopolitan counterweights to dysfunctional or exclusionary nation-states (e.g., Barber, 2013). Cordes shares some of this optimism but subjects it to a crucial test: power for what, and for whom? A city may resist federal immigration enforcement while simultaneously promoting luxury development, privatizing public space, criminalizing homelessness, or maintaining policing practices that expose immigrants to federal authorities. Greater municipal autonomy therefore cannot itself be equated with progressive governance. This argument productively connects migration scholarship to longstanding urban debates about the just city, the right to the city, urban political economy, and local state capacity (e.g., Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 2008). Sanctuary becomes a particularly revealing lens because immigration is conventionally understood as an area of national sovereignty, yet the everyday consequences of immigration status are profoundly urban: they shape residents' access to institutions, services, neighborhoods, public space, and political participation. Cordes thus makes migration central rather

than peripheral to urban theory. Her argument is especially valuable at a moment when scholars increasingly look to cities to counter national political retrenchment: local autonomy matters, she reminds us, but its normative value depends on how municipal power is exercised and distributed.

A second strength is Cordes's shift from sanctuary as policy to sanctuary as practice. This move makes civil society central to urban governance and helps explain why formally similar sanctuary cities may generate very different experiences of inclusion. Her New York fieldwork shows sanctuary being made through accompaniment to immigration court and ICE appointments, vigils, legal assistance, assemblies, rapid-response networks, and neighborhood organizing. The particularly evocative "Sanctuary Hood" moves sanctuary beyond city hall or the church and into *bodegas*, salons, businesses, workplaces, streets, and other everyday spaces. In doing so, Cordes demonstrates how urban space itself becomes politically productive: residents who lack national citizenship can nevertheless participate in shaping the institutions and spaces around them. This is where the book makes its strongest contribution to scholarship on urban citizenship. Rather than asking only who possesses citizenship, it asks who participates, makes claims, provides collective goods, and helps produce the city. The resulting conception of citizenship as practice resonates with work on insurgent citizenship and the right to the city while bringing migration status more fully into those conversations. Just as importantly, Cordes avoids depicting undocumented immigrants simply as recipients of humanitarian assistance. Sanctuary can instead create spaces in which noncitizens become political actors who claim a "right to have rights."

The book's ambition, however, also produces its first weakness: it sometimes asks too many concepts to explain the same empirical phenomena. Across the chapters, sanctuary is connected to grounded cosmopolitanism, sovereignty from below, rebel cities, urban commons, political space, civil disobedience, denizenship, co-citizenship, radical solidarity, abolitionist sanctuary, strong democracy, rightful presence, and the right to the city. Each connection is suggestive, but their accumulation sometimes obscures rather than sharpens the book's theoretical contribution. The empirical evidence seems most compelling when Cordes makes the focused claim that grassroots sanctuary enables people excluded from national citizenship to participate politically, make rights claims, appropriate urban space, and construct forms of urban membership. "Urban citizenship" or "denizenship" could perhaps have provided a more parsimonious conceptual anchor around which the other ideas were organized. The language of "sovereignty from below," for example, makes a larger claim than the evidence requires: accompaniment, protest, legal advocacy, and neighborhood organizing clearly contest sovereign authority, but contesting sovereignty is not necessarily the same as exercising it. Greater differentiation among resistance, governance, citizenship, autonomy, and sovereignty would therefore make the book's important theoretical intervention more precise.

A second limitation concerns comparative explanation and the relationship between grassroots activism and urban institutions. New York and the NSC carry much of the empirical weight, with San Francisco, Philadelphia, and international cases appearing more selectively. The result is rich insight into how sanctuary operates in one mobilized urban setting, but less leverage for explaining why sanctuary differs across cities. This matters because the book provides intriguing evidence of variation. Philadelphia, for example, appears to have connected immigrant-rights organizing more extensively to housing, eviction protection, libraries, parks, and homelessness than the New York movement Cordes studied. What explains that difference? Local political coalitions, immigrant organizational capacity, mayoral leadership, state preemption, racial politics, nonprofit infrastructures, housing markets, and municipal administrative capacity are plausible mechanisms. A more explicitly comparative design could have moved the argument from demonstrating the possibilities and limits of sanctuary toward explaining the conditions under which more expansive forms emerge. Relatedly, the book sometimes treats grassroots practice as sanctuary's "real" domain even while showing that activists depend on municipal legal protections, services, institutional openings, and resources. For urban governance scholars, the interaction between civil society and local government may therefore be less a background condition than a central causal relationship requiring fuller theorization (e.g., de Graauw, 2016).

These reservations do not diminish the importance of *The Politics of Sanctuary*. Indeed, one of the book's virtues is Cordes's caution about sanctuary's transformative possibilities. Sanctuary can generate political spaces, solidarity, and forms of membership, but it remains small-scale, resource constrained, and embedded in cities marked by severe racial and economic inequality. The book is consequently most persuasive not as a claim that sanctuary cities have transcended national citizenship or produced the just city, but as an account of how urban actors create partial and contested alternatives within unequal institutional landscapes. Its call for an "expanded sanctuary" that links immigrant justice to housing, redistribution, racial justice, policing, and incarceration is especially productive as an agenda for future research and practice. *The Politics of Sanctuary* will therefore be valuable not only to scholars of immigration and sanctuary but also to researchers and practitioners concerned with urban governance, social movements, citizenship, planning, federalism, and inequality. Above all, Cordes encourages urbanists to ask a question that extends well beyond immigration: not simply whether cities possess the authority to resist exclusionary national states, but whether urban institutions and movements can turn that resistance into a broader and more materially consequential politics of belonging.

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