



Reclaiming Democracy in Cities

Edited by

Gülçin Balamir Coşkun, Tuba İnal-Çekiç,
and Ertuğ Tombuş

RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY IN CITIES

Effective urban governance is essential in responding to the challenges of inequality, migration, public health, housing, security, and climate change. *Reclaiming Democracy in Cities* frames the city as a political actor in its own right, exploring the city's potential to develop deliberative and participatory practices which help inform innovative democratic solutions to modern day challenges.

Bringing together expertise from an international selection of scholars from various fields, this book begins with three chapters which discuss the theoretical idea of the democratic city and the real-world applicability of such a model. **Part II** discusses new and innovative democratic practices at the local level and asks in what way these practices help us to rethink democratic politics, institutions, and mechanisms in order to move toward a more egalitarian, pluralist, and inclusive direction. Drawing on the Istanbul municipal elections and the Kurdish municipal experience, **Part III** focuses on the question of whether cities and local governments can lead to the emergence of strong democratic forces that oppose authoritarian regimes. Finally, **Part IV** discusses urban solidarity networks and collaborations at both the local level and beyond the nation, questioning whether urban solidarity networks and alliances with civil society or transnational city networks can create alternative ways of thinking about the city as a locus of democracy.

This edited volume will appeal to academics, researchers, and advanced students in the fields of urban studies, particularly those with an interest in democratic theory; local democracy; participation and municipalities. It will also be relevant for practitioners of local governments, NGOs, and advocacy groups and activists working for solidarity networks between cities.

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We dedicate this book to the memory of those who lost their lives during the Gezi protests in Istanbul, as well as those unjustly imprisoned in the Gezi trial. Their courageous struggle for the right to the city continues to inspire us and reminds us of the ongoing cry for justice, freedom, and inclusive cities. May their voices echo through these pages and guide our collective efforts toward a more just and democratic future.



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INTRODUCTION

Democracy's Crisis and Its Urban Resurgence

Gülçin Balamir Coşkun, Tuba İnal-Çekiç, Ertuğ Tombuş

Crisis

Despite the widespread optimism that prevailed at the end of the Cold War regarding the state and the future of democracy, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have borne witness to a profound crisis in democratic governance. This crisis is evident in the decline of democratic regimes and the alarming global trend toward autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The turn of the new millennium replaced the once buoyant hopes with the worrying reality of democratic failures. In its “Nations in Transit 2023 Report,” Freedom House emphasized that “for the 19th consecutive year, democratic governance suffered an overall decline in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia.” Moreover, the latest report published by the V-Dem Institute indicates that by 2022, 72 percent of the world’s population was living under autocracies. The report notes that many countries experiencing severe autocratic developments have regressed to levels of democracy last seen in the late 1980s. “Advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out,” the report underlines (V-Dem Institute 2023, 6).

The threat to democracy is not limited to nations with already weak and fragile democratic institutions. While countries such as Turkey, India, Hungary, Brazil, and El Salvador have experienced the full force of autocratization, even established democracies such as the United States, Britain, Germany, and France, where the democratic foundations were once thought to be secure, are in danger. Long considered to have consolidated democracies, these nations have witnessed worrisome autocratic tendencies. In recent years, right-wing political actors and parties with illiberal agendas against civil liberties, minorities, migrants, and plurality have gained substantial public support, both in Europe and in the United States (Foa and Mounk 2016). Trump’s presidency, Brexit, and the increasing support of the extreme right in Germany and France have unequivocally demonstrated that the threat to democracy is not a hypothetical future possibility but a reality that has already materialized.

While there is a consensus that democracy is confronting a crisis, both as a concept and a practice (Forst 2023), there is no agreement when it comes to the diagnosis of this crisis. Various perspectives on the crisis of democracy offer distinct explanations as to its nature,

underlying causes, and possible remedies. In the context of this introduction, we do not aim to discuss the merits of these divergent accounts. Rather, our objective is to provide an overview of two different understandings of the challenges to democracy: authoritarian populism and the radicalization of the right; and post-democracy and the neoliberal transformation of democratic politics. In doing so, we aim to highlight the city as a possible source of ideas and practices for a renewed commitment to democracy and its core principles as a response to the crisis of democracy.

Authoritarian Populism and the Radicalization of the Right

Over the past decade, populism has emerged as the central concept employed by scholars to explain the defining features of new autocratic regimes and to give reason for the decline of democracy (Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Zakaria 2016; Mudde 2016; Judis 2017). The challenge posed by populism to the liberal constitutional order stands as the primary catalyst driving democracies into crisis and triggering processes of democratic erosion. Populist leaders, according to this narrative, come to power through democratic means with the claim of representing the people against the corrupt elite and the establishment (Mudde 2016; Mounk 2018; Arato and Cohen 2022). Once in power, they undermine the liberal constitutional order, seeking to eliminate any constraints to their political power stemming from liberal constitutional principles and institutions such as the separation of power and the rule of law. In the meantime, these leaders launch attacks on free media, courts, and civil society organizations with the claim to be bringing political power back to the people.

Studies in the emerging research field of democratic backsliding or decline have emphasized that the erosion of democracy in contemporary times occurs gradually, by incremental measures implemented by democratically elected populist leaders. (Bermeo 2016; Runciman 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). These measures encompass legal reforms, executive orders, and, ultimately, constitutional amendments, enabling populist leaders to consolidate their hold on political power. These new autocrats do not abolish the institutions and procedures of the liberal democratic order, such as constitutional courts, independent bodies, and elections. Instead, they establish a system in which these institutions persist as mere façades, appropriated to serve the interests of the autocratic ruler (Scheppele 2018; Castillo-Ortiz 2019).

Elections are held without any genuine free and fair competition, marred by disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of public opinion. Courts are instrumentalized to criminalize and punish social and political opposition. The free media is captured to amplify the autocrat's voice. Consequently, democracy becomes an empty façade, devoid of meaningful participation or the potential for political change. As Nancy Bermeo underlines, these democratic abuses "are legitimated by the very institutions democracy promoters prioritize" (Bermeo 2016). Viewed through the lens of the newly analytical framework of democratic backsliding and critiques of populism, the liberal democratic constitutional order finds itself in a state of crisis instigated by these populist leaders.

There is no doubt that political leaders like Erdogan, Orban, and Trump are responsible for significant attacks on democratic politics and institutions within their respective countries. However, the critical question is as to whether we can attribute the crisis their actions evidence to populism alone. Some argue that focusing on populism diverts our attention away from the real threat. Criticizing this populism-centric perspective, Andreas Kalyvas argues

that “the widespread thesis about a general crisis of democracy manifested in the form of a populist challenge to the liberal constitutional order is misleading, as it appears anachronistic, politically counterproductive, and ideologically suspicious” (Kalyvas 2019, 384). Instead of locating the current challenges to democracy at a front between populism and liberal democracy, Kalyvas contends that we should direct our attention to the ideological programs of these new autocrats. He asserts, “the presumed crisis of democracy is described and explained in the abstract terms of a generic populist temptation instead of the more concrete political plans and societal projects of a general radicalization of the right on the rise, characterized by the elements of a process of fascisization of state and society” (Kalyvas 2019, 387). It is not the inherently authoritarian and illiberal nature of populism that originates democracies’ crisis; rather, it is the extreme right and its growing political influence over public discourse and state policies that define our contemporary political challenge.

The radicalization of the right has fueled xenophobia, nativism, and the idea of a homogenous society that is intolerant to diversity based on ethnicity, religion, or gender. The increasing polarization within societies, amplified by the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, has rendered meaningful political discussions and deliberations nearly impossible. As happened in the cases of Erdogan, Orban, Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro, what we see is the vilification of political opposition and the declaration of anyone against their interests as enemies of the people.

Furthermore, what makes the extreme right and the new autocrats particularly alarming is their ability to present their undemocratic and illiberal agenda as a supposed call for democracy. This appropriation of democratic rhetoric enables them to exploit public dissatisfaction, tapping into legitimate grievances while simultaneously promoting divisive narratives and enmity to differences and diversity. As democratic imposters, they seek to legitimize their anti-democratic actions and erode the very foundations of democratic values.

The question at this point, however, is whether populist leaders and radical-right parties are the only imposters who reduce democracy to a mere façade by emptying it of any core democratic values. It has long been argued that the transformation of democratic politics in the postwar era, parallel to neoliberal capitalism, has turned liberal democratic politics into a set of empty rituals. As much as this erosion of democracy is a defining characteristic of today’s right-wing populist leaders, to reduce democracy into a mere “spectacle” without any real empowerment of the members of broader society is not their innovation.

Post-democracy and the Neoliberal Transformation of Democratic Politics

The concept of post-democracy underlines a similar process in which democracy is reduced to repeated practices as mere rituals, depriving citizens of any real influence over political decisions. Political institutions and decision-makers increasingly align themselves with the market and prioritize the interests of corporations. Focusing too much on populist leaders and seeing populism as a pathology that “afflicts and disturbs an otherwise just constitutional order” (Kalyvas 2019, 386) is a myopic view that mixes symptoms with the underlying disease. The crisis of democracy today is “the crisis of neoliberal hegemonic formation” (Mouffe 2018, 11; see also Fraser 2017; Streeck 2017).

The post-democracy argument suggests that “the postwar period of democratization has given way to a concentration of power in the hands of a small group that are unrepresentative and unaccountable, as exemplified by the rise of multinational corporations and their

influence on democratic politics” (Pabst 2016, 91). The institutions and actors of liberal democracies worldwide operating within neoliberal globalization have become disconnected from the interests of the masses and are failing to provide any meaningful channel for them to be heard and shape politics. Public trust in political parties and political institutions had already diminished even before the resurgence of populism. Thinking of populism and the rise of the far right as a symptom of the failure of liberal democratic institutions, instead of seeing them as an external enemy of democracy somehow managing to invade an otherwise well-functioning democratic politics, gives us a different perspective on the nature of the crisis of democracy. Instead of fulfilling the promise of democracy for equality, emancipation, and empowerment, liberal democratic institutions facilitated the emergence of new oligarchies and became unresponsive to increasing political and economic inequality. Ross Poole (2023, 1–3) argues that “the state itself has been remodeled on market lines. What this means is that the state has not only been unwilling but increasingly unable to deal with the problems caused by the demands of capital accumulation: massive inequality, dislocation, loss of employment in local industries, and so on.” As Adrina Pabst states, “in consequence, liberal democracy risks sliding into a form of democratic despotism that maintains the illusion of free choice while instilling a sense of voluntary servitude as conceptualized by Tocqueville” (2016, 91).

Democracy and the City

Discussions on the current crisis of democracy highlight the dysfunctionality of liberal democratic politics either as a result of the new autocrats or the crisis of the neoliberal consensus. In both cases, liberal democratic institutions have been taken over by the oligarchic few or the autocratic leaders. Both interpretations of the democratic crisis call for the reclamation of democracy from these usurpers in order to establish political institutions grounded in principles of equality, solidarity, and emancipation.

In the twenty-first century, local political dynamics have gained increasing significance as potential sites for democratic resistance, movements, and innovations. In each form of crisis of democracy, cities and local democracy as potential sources of innovative ideas and practices of democratic politics have gained prominence. It is argued that city and urban politics, urban diplomacy, and solidarity networks among cities offer an alternative understanding by which to address the issues of autocratic takeover, neoliberal transformations, and climate change. Cities have been able to find solutions to global challenges in line with the needs of local populations. By creating global networks and pacts, cities have also increasingly become a major political actor in global politics.

In 2018 and 2019, mayors from opposition parties to their central governments won the local elections and took over the administrations of the major cities in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Turkey. These electoral victories came in countries where autocratic parties in government have effectively manipulated national elections, consolidating their grip on political power. These outcomes have generated a sense of optimism about the possibility to challenge and potentially defeat the autocratic leaders. In 2019, the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw signed the Pact of Free Cities to stand against the ongoing attacks on progressive values and the deterioration of democratic politics in their countries. The mayors underlined “the growing importance of cities in preserving and protecting democracy and open society” (Pact of Free Cities, n.d., homepage).

In March 2019, the opposition party candidate won the Istanbul elections and ended the ruling party's control of the city since 1994. The implications of this electoral defeat extend far beyond the city limits, demonstrating the resilience of social and political opposition in the face of a decade-long period of authoritarian measures and the suppression of democratic politics on a national scale. It gives the hope that reclaiming democracy at the national level could start in the cities.

In contrast to the recent focus on cities as possible sites of democratic opposition to populist authoritarians, neoliberalism and its distorting effects on both urban space and democracy have long been the subject of research. Recent political-economy research has paid much attention to the study of neoliberal globalization, with a particular focus on the effects of these processes on urban space and urban governance (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Leitner and Sheppard 2002). A further contribution to this discourse is by calling for a rethinking of urban politics and the study of city regions in the context of globalization and democracy (Brenner and Theodore 2002; MacLeod 2011, 26–29; Purcell 2007, 197). While efforts to understand the consequences of urban neoliberalization reveal the increasing power of capital in shaping urban space and its relationship with the public, there is a pervasive, if underexplored, perception that urban neoliberalization poses a threat to urban democracy (Jessop 2002; Jones and Ward 2002; Kipfer and Keil 2002; MacLeod 2002; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002).

Another question that deepens and develops the debate on the increasing power of capital in shaping urban space and its implications for urban democracy (Jessop 2002; MacLeod 2002; Swyngedouw et al. 2002) is why and how neoliberal globalization is particularly manifested in cities and urban space. The concerted effort to position many of the world's cities as vibrant, cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial, and globally connected entities within a neoliberal, market-oriented urban order is also common to urban space, with examples including major urban infrastructure projects and ambitious architectural and development initiatives in cities as diverse as Amsterdam, Bilbao, Berlin, London, Istanbul, and Barcelona (Moulaert, Swyngedouw, and Rodriguez 2001).

These redevelopment projects around the world, which aim to restructure cities according to the visions of urban elites (Swyngedouw et al. 2002), have created conflicts with planning authorities over the shaping of space and have given impetus to the development of urban struggles and urban movements. As Barnett (2014) points out, the recognition of this contestation is crucial for the transformation of urban space in order to further explore the relationship between democracy and urbanization. It has also led to an increased interest in exploring alternative approaches to the democratization of decision-making processes in urban spatial production (Amin and Thrift 2002; Friedmann 2002).

This perspective aligns with the concepts of the “right to the city” (Dikeç and Gilbert 2002; Purcell 2002) and the “just city” (Marcuse et al. 2009), which have been central to the conceptualization of cities as sites of democratic engagement. These discussions often intersect with debates on urban democracy (Amin and Thrift 2002) and spatial justice (Soja 2013), while the concept of democracy has also played a crucial role in radical geographical analyses of neoliberal processes of dispossession and unequal accumulation in urban areas (Harvey 2003; Barnett 2014). At this point, it is worth revisiting Jacques Rancière's notion of the democratization of the police, in which he underlines the need to challenge the threats to urban democracy posed by neoliberal globalization, emphasizing the reshaping of urban spaces as democratic political arenas (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014, 171–72).

Accordingly, as pointed out by Diken and Lausten, true political space is characterized by constant contestation, driven by the pursuit of equality for marginalized individuals who lack a voice or place. In urban politics, engaging in critical debates, challenging established orders, and striving for radical change are essential. Democracy, in this context, surpasses mere agreement or the maintenance of order; it lies in the invention of previously unauthorized means of disaggregation, disagreement, and disorder, persistently pursuing the seemingly impossible (Swyngedouw 2010).

Overview of Chapters

This edited volume brings together scholars from different regions and disciplines to reflect on and discuss the transformative power of local politics in promoting democratic practices. Divided into 4 parts and 13 chapters, the volume offers a multidimensional exploration of the re-imagining of democracy from the local level.

Part I lays the theoretical foundations for the rethinking of democracy in the urban context. Through a critical examination of the concept of the democratic city, the chapters in this part challenge conventional notions and delve into the complexities of the relationship between the city and democracy. By engaging with theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks, we aim to open up new avenues for understanding and reshaping democracy in contemporary times and to provide a solid foundation for the further exploration of urban politics and governance.

In his thought-provoking opening chapter, Erik Swyngedouw delves into the intricate dynamics of contemporary depoliticization shaped by a pervasive discourse and practice of consensual techno-managerial urban governance. He sheds light on the post-democratic forms of governance that perpetuate this depoliticization, facilitated within an unquestioned liberal capitalist framework. His exploration revolves around three interconnected arguments. Firstly, he examines how the nature of emancipation has undergone a profound shift, emphasizing individual enjoyment over collective processes and its implications for democratic configurations. Secondly, he uncovers the complex relationship between the transformation of emancipation and the rise of illiberal ideologies within post-democratic systems. Lastly, he contextualizes these processes against the backdrop of a simultaneous depoliticization of governance and surge in antagonistic violence. The chapter concludes with a compelling call to reclaim the democratic polis by embracing transgressive pleasure rooted in an inherent desire for fulfillment, aiming to transcend the impasse between autocratic post-democracy and the culture of neo-liberalization and to revitalize the democratic spirit.

In their chapter, Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch explore the multifaceted relationship between the city and democracy. While their focus is not on the changing view of the city in democratic theory but rather on delineating the diverse projects of democracy that have mobilized the city across time and place, they acknowledge the enduring political significance of this connection. Their contribution commences by detailing the interplay between the city and democracy, highlighting its continuing potency. They then turn their attention to contrasting democratic projects of the city: the city as state and the city as urban demos, examining their overlapping yet distinct characteristics. Against this background, they introduce the concept of new municipalism as a democratic project that serves as an interface between the state and the demos, bridging the two projects. The authors also argue for an alternative democratic vision of the city that is manifested in activist practices around the world.

This vision portrays the city as a collective project of urban life, prioritizing everyday practices that promote communal arrangements rather than relying solely on the state. The chapter concludes by exploring the potential implications of this democratic city for new-municipalist strategies and practices. It acknowledges the challenges of aligning dispersed everyday democratic practices with state institutions and long-term projects while also considering the concept of a non-sovereign state as a means for new municipalism to pursue institutional power and cultivate diverse sources of democratic politics.

In [Chapter 3](#), Verena Frick examines the democratic ideals associated with cities and their capacity to withstand societal pressures. Going beyond formal urban governance, Frick examines the diagnosis of crisis, explores the democratic qualities ascribed to cities, and presents institutional ideas for urban reform. From a normative democratic-theory perspective, the chapter introduces a typology of four dominant ideals that shape the democratic city: the city as a school of democracy, the urban cosmopolis, the city as a commons, and the sustainable city. These ideals encompass the historical emancipatory promise of cities and their relevance in the contemporary context. By assessing the emancipatory potential of cities in three dimensions—legal status, critical agency, and autonomy of action—the chapter sheds light on the possibilities for democratizing urban spaces. Frick’s nuanced perspective underscores the crucial interplay between cities and democracy, forcing us to reassess the prospects for democratic governance, to understand its spatial expressions, and to forge innovative ways of realizing it.

[Part II](#) focuses on participation, with three chapters exploring new and innovative democratic practices at the local level. The authors critically analyze the role of these practices in reshaping democratic policies, institutions, and mechanisms in a more egalitarian, pluralist, and inclusive direction. By exploring the potential of participatory approaches, this section opens up avenues for the reimagining of democratic governance and the promotion of active citizen engagement. The chapters highlight the importance of inclusive decision-making processes, the transformative impact of participatory planning, and the role of civic activism in promoting democratic values and citizen participation in strengthening democratic processes and addressing contemporary challenges.

In the opening chapter of [part II](#), İnal-Çekiç et al. tackle the overarching question of how the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) embodies participation and inclusivity by critically examining the level of participation. Centering their analysis around the “Istanbul Vision 2050 Strategic Plan,” the authors investigate the composition and levels of involvement of participants in the strategic-planning process. Their findings shed light on the three distinct levels of participant engagement: communication, consultation, and collaboration. As the chapter concludes, it becomes evident that although efforts have been made to promote citizen participation, the achieved level of inclusivity falls short of the ideals outlined in the literature. While the IMM demonstrates an inclusive strategy in terms of information sharing, cooperation during the implementation phase remains confined to a select group of technocrats.

In [Chapter 5](#), Pachenkov et al. present an insightful exploration of the transformative potential of participatory planning and design in urban development projects, with a specific focus on the Republic of Bashkortostan in the Russian Federation. Their study delves into the impact of these participatory practices on public spaces, the public sphere, and civil society within the complex dynamics of a hybrid political regime. By examining the interplay between urban actors such as NGOs, civic initiatives, activists, and local authorities,

the authors shed light on the crucial role played by active civil-society actors in fostering a vibrant public life and thriving civil society. Their research shows that active civil-society actors play the most important role in fostering good public life and civil society. While external expert assistance plays a supportive role, the continuity of local official power primarily affects the level of conflict rather than the state of civil society. Overall, their analysis demonstrates the potential for cultivating democratic values and developing a democratic society through participatory practices in public space projects, even in the context of a hybrid political system.

Chapter 6, by Daniel Oross and Agnieszka Kampka, focuses on the self-governing dimension of deliberative and participatory democracy in the context of two cities, exploring how the successes of opposition forces in local elections in Budapest and Warsaw have provided a glimmer of hope for democratic forces against the authoritarian regimes in Hungary and Poland. The impact of government decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic on local government activities, combined with trends toward centralization and financial constraints, has indeed posed significant challenges to the implementation of projects and the financial stability of cities, as highlighted by Oross and Kampka. Despite these obstacles, civic activism has taken various forms in both capitals, driven by the belief that cities can be a platform for democratic citizen participation and the coexistence of different social groups. The chapter also examines the role of urban movements, both participatory and professional, in shaping local policies and promoting democratic participation. In addition, they highlight the importance of activists and pro-European mayors in shaping and supporting civic participation, while legal and institutional factors facilitate deliberative practices and initiatives such as participatory budgeting. Finally, their chapter emphasizes the importance of developing active citizenship and a “democratic habit” to strengthen participation and address challenges such as refugee integration.

Part III of the book is dedicated to examining whether cities and local governments can lead the emergence of strong democratic forces that oppose authoritarian regimes. This part comprises two chapters that specifically analyze the case of the Istanbul municipal elections and the victory of the main opposition party, and a third chapter that draws on a Kurdish municipal experience and critically connects the emerging literature on “new municipalism” to the debates surrounding ethno-nationally contested cities in the Global South. By examining these critical examples, this section aims to shed light on the capacity of cities to foster democratic resistance and shape alternative political futures.

In **Chapter 7**, Yılmaz Uçar examines the transformation of metropolitan politics and administration in Istanbul, focusing on the shift from the ruling AKP’s hegemonic project to the new metropolitan model introduced by the secular CHP. The chapter highlights how the AKP used the construction sector to facilitate capital accumulation, resulting in a dominant central-government influence on metropolitan politics over the past two decades. However, under the rule of the CHP, Istanbul is witnessing a paradigm shift. The new metropolitan model emphasizes an inclusive discourse and incorporates participatory mechanisms to counter the previous hegemonic project. Municipal governance in Istanbul now emphasizes values such as secularism, collectivism, decentralization, and a rights-based approach to social services. This chapter raises important questions about the success, sustainability, and potential role of metropolitan municipalities in sustaining the counter-hegemonic project within the established capitalist relations of a unitary state. It also suggests exploring the legacy of social municipal practices, comparing different metropolitan

areas as sites of opposition, and examining interactions with global movements such as the new-municipalism movement.

In her [Chapter 8](#), Oya Yeğen delves into the conflict that emerged between the central government and the megacity of Istanbul following the election victory of the opposition candidate through the lens of “disempowerment” and “self-empowerment” as framed by constitutional-law scholar Ran Hirschl. The empirical evidence highlights how the central government has employed various strategies to disempower the city, while the mayor has attempted to reclaim power. The chapter examines the spatial, political, and legal context of Istanbul’s relationship with the central government, explores examples of disempowerment such as financial constraints and the transfer of competences, and evaluates the mayor’s efforts to empower the city. It concludes by analyzing the implications of these dynamics for Istanbul. Overall, the chapter emphasizes the urgent need for empowerment in a context of urban growth, vulnerability to climate change, and an increasingly authoritarian regime.

Firat Genç focuses, in [Chapter 9](#), on the Kurdish municipal experience in Diyarbakır, a city in the Kurdish-populated southeastern region of Turkey. Drawing on the concept of “new municipalism,” the chapter explores the interplay between the Kurdish movement’s radical democratic project and mainstream notions of development. It argues for a broader political and geographical approach that takes into account the multi-layered dynamics at different scales, particularly in ethno-nationally contested cities. The chapter highlights the importance of understanding the link between urban politics and social reform, tracing its historical roots from municipal socialism to contemporary examples of new municipalism around the world. The case of Diyarbakır reveals the complexity of Kurdish municipalism and its interaction with dominant neoliberal development frameworks. The analysis sheds light on how the politics of scale and urban neoliberalization can influence bottom-up democratizing initiatives. By adopting a comprehensive approach to new municipal politics that includes diverse municipal experiences, especially from the Global South, a deeper understanding of the role and potential of cities in shaping alternative political futures can be achieved.

[Part IV](#) delves into urban solidarity networks and collaborations at the local level, as well as beyond the national boundaries. The chapters in this section interrogate whether urban solidarity networks and alliances with civil society or transnational city networks can create alternative ways of thinking about democratic politics. By exploring the potential of collective action and cross-border collaborations, this part sheds light on the transformative possibilities at the intersection of local and global dynamics.

Helena Bernhardt’s [Chapter 10](#) explores how solidarity can address barriers faced by refugees in Vienna’s housing market. The chapter proposes policy recommendations for a solidarity-based planning concept that integrates civil society practices and challenges exclusionary policies. It emphasizes the need for accessible municipal and subsidized housing, a solidarity-based neighborhood fund, and transformative strategies that empower refugees and amplify their voices. The chapter highlights the potential and challenges of existing solitary spaces, advocating for a structural revision of urban housing policy to accommodate low-income residents in atypical living situations. Overall, the chapter contributes to the discourse on social infrastructures and inclusive housing for all.

Aslıhan Aykaç’s [Chapter 11](#) explores the emergence of alternative social mobilizations in response to the declining capacity of the state to counterbalance neoliberalism. The chapter examines the relationship between urban solidarity networks and local governance as a political alternative to the crisis of the state and liberal democracy. Through a multilayered

framework, it analyzes the structure of urban solidarity networks, their interactions with stakeholders, and their impact on local governing procedures focusing on the metropolitan area of Izmir, Turkey. The chapter also discusses the risks of cooptation, mainstreaming, or detachment faced by these networks in relation to local government and subsidiary branches. Aykaç critically evaluates the potential of urban solidarity networks in democratizing urban politics and fostering innovative political participation.

Chungse Jung in [Chapter 12](#), examines the impact of neoliberal urban redevelopment projects, particularly the New Town Projects, in Seoul in the opening decade of this century. These projects faced resistance from organized and empowered urban social groups who were advocating for an expanded “right to the city.” The chapter focuses on the Wangsimni and Changsin-Sungin areas, highlighting their transformation from low-income spaces into planned gentrifying communities. While the Wangsimni New Town project created divisions among property owners and excluded tenants from its incentive structure, the global economic recession of 2007–08 led to an increased activism challenging neoliberal urban redevelopment and advocating for an expanded right to the city. The Changsin-Sungin area witnessed the emergence of a cross-class alliance of the urban precariat, tenants, property owners, and activists fighting against dispossession and displacement. These urban struggles empowered urban residents to challenge the dominant alliance between neoliberal states and speculative capital. The chapter highlights the role of these contested urban spaces as sites of resistance and the potential for innovative democratic practices, showing how urban activism can reshape urban governance structures and promote post-neoliberal democratic approaches.

In the final chapter of the book, Birgül Demirtaş examines Istanbul’s city diplomacy during the term of Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. The chapter examines the municipality’s goals and distinctive characteristics in international activities, highlighting its commitment to peaceful relations, adherence to universal norms, reliance on funding from international organizations, and creation of new initiatives. It argues that cities in de-democratizing states can actively shape their foreign relations, even in non-Western contexts. The study highlights Istanbul’s efforts to rebuild positive international relations, secure financial resources, and foster solidarity among opposition-led municipalities. Ultimately, the chapter concludes that city diplomacy has the potential to advance foreign policy objectives, promote global norms, and foster regional initiatives even in less democratic states.

By bringing together these diverse perspectives, this edited volume aims to contribute to ongoing debates and inspire further research and action toward democratic change and transformation at the local level. The chapters, authored by experts from various disciplines and regions, collectively offer rich insights into the potentials and challenges of rethinking democracy from the local, fostering a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of democratic practices in urban contexts. We hope this book serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, activists, and anyone interested in exploring the transformative power of local politics in shaping democratic futures.

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