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The Smart City in a Digital World
Review on Mosco Vincent's *The Smart City in a Digital World*,
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Mosco Vincent is a Canadian sociologist who received his doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1975. He is currently a professor at the University of Queen of Ontario in Canada. He was formerly chair of research in Communication and Society. Mosco is the author and editor of more than 200 articles or book chapters and 26 books on different topics, mainly on the political economy of communication, the future of cities, and the social impacts of information technology. His publications have been translated into many languages, including Chinese¹.

Through the quick evolution of information and communication technologies, a lot of researchers have tried to comprehend the impact of information technology on human life. Perspectives on the contribution of information and communication technologies to current global social change vary considerably. While optimistic researchers emphasize the decisive role of information and communication technologies in the development and modernization process of society, pessimistic researchers stress the continuing emergence and growth of the digital gap that causes inequalities internationally.

The writer, in *The Smart City in a Digital World*, clearly falls into the camp of the pessimists. He challenges the worldwide smart city movement, pointing out that the application of technologies in urban spaces increases monitoring, transfers urban governance to the hands of the business community, reduces transparency, and accelerates devastating climate change. In the author's words, *The Smart City in a Digital World* was one of the three works in an ongoing research project aiming to study the relationship between human society and technology. Contrary to its previous ones, *To the Cloud* (2014)² and *Becoming Digital* (2017)³, both of which focus primarily on historical descriptions of information and communication technologies, *The Smart City in a Digital World* presents the roadmap of the construction of urban areas within the new digital environment. Overall, it questions the current establishment of smart cities, a fashionable word that Mosco crucially dissects as another of the sublime visions, such as postmodern cities⁴ and garden cities,⁵ that continually pop up as urban mythologies.

¹ Dr. Vincent Mosco. Available on: <http://www.vincentmosco.com/about.html>, accessed on December 29, 2021.

² Mosco, *To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World*. Routledge, 2014.

³ Mosco, *Becoming Digital: Toward a Post-Internet Society (SocietyNow)*. Emerald Publishing, 2017.

⁴ Postmodern cities are meant not to shelter people but instead to entertain society.

⁵ The garden city is a model of urban planning which was characterized by progressive visions of solving the problems of rural-urban migration and the resulting disorderly growth of urban areas.

The book is divided into eight chapters that bring together his previous critical work on *After the Internet: Cloud Computing, Big Data and the Internet of Things*⁶, with a focus on the high-tech enterprises that manage the physical, social, and administrative transformations of the urban built environment. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a theoretical focus, depicting the context, research topic, core notions, and the book's analytical context. Chapters 3–6 examine the tangible formation of smart cities. In particular, the focus is on the technological implementations of smart cities and on exploring the different types of governance that characterize them. Chapter 7 looks at how smart cities are culturally constituted, while chapter 8 comes as the concluding section in which he outlines his thoughts and concerns about technologies and cities. Theoretically, the book points to attempts of Mosco to bring a critical outlook to challenging prevailing ideologies, most of which rely upon technology's transcendental power. Mosco's view of citizenship and local democracy for smart cities in the present work is critical of these technological determinists' instrumental rationality.

Mosco explains, within the first part of his book, the reasons behind his choice of cities as a research topic. He argues that cities are now the areas where democracy's promise has been fulfilled. He believes that cities are usually more cosmopolitan than the country-state, but still more closely aligned with the interests of typical citizens. The movement of the smart city globally has slightly expanded the power of privately held technological companies over cities since 2018. For this, Mosco is concerned that urban residents are in danger of being stripped of their communal democratic privileges as governance is turned over to the private sector, monitoring grows, and information about their personal life becomes something that can be marketed easily. This book is therefore about building resistance towards privacy, helping people retain control of their personal life, and ultimately preserving democracy within a digital world.

Thereafter, the writer demonstrates the smart city's social history concepts. In the words of Mosco, the smart city idea grew out of business needs. It emerged with the report of IBM⁷ in 2009 urging for making "smarter cities," making it one of the attempts of the company to create a new market after the financial crisis of 2008. During the initial phases of the development of smart cities, there were two identical approaches to the smart city. The first one was based on technology, which was backed by a number of scientists and many technology companies, establishing the metrics of smart city implementation by using smart new technologies only. The second one was citizenbased and was suggested by some socialists and officials to broaden the focus of the smart city idea

⁶ Mosco, *After the Internet: Cloud Computing, Big Data and the Internet of Things*. GRESEC, 2016, 146–155.

⁷ International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) is an American multinational technology company.

to include development and sustainability, people and technology, livability, and participatory governance. The writer examines how the technology-driven conception of smart city was developed with the expansion of information and communication technologies, how it progressively governed a substantial part of the discourse of smart city, and finally, how it drove the current smart city development context, broadly engaged with private enterprise tenets.

Subsequently, the focus shifts to examining the infrastructure of smart cities through technologies. The writer examines four tools that are essential to building smart cities: advanced telecommunications, cloud computing, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things. Mosco illustrates how these web-based systems are incorporated into the fabric of urban life and form the basis of smart cities, and also looks at the relationships of power that lie behind these technologies. The analysis suggests that non-elected private bodies are becoming more and more involved in the governance of urban spaces than the elected political authorities, as governments rely on the technological capacities of the private sector to deliver on the promise of smart cities.

The writer further looks at the issue of smart cities' governance. Mosco, by relying on worldwide case studies, differentiates between three forms of governance for smart cities: state-led, private business-led, and citizen-driven. More precisely, the writer examines state-led smart cities in India, China, and Singapore. For him, China stands out as a case in point because of its status as a nation with over 50% of the world's smart city projects. The writer describes China's smart city projects, ranging from the development of ancient cities to the establishment of totally new smart ones, and also looks at the proactive role of large technology companies in China (e.g., Huawei, Tencent, etc.) in setting up their plans for smart cities. Mosco argues that the large-scale investment by China in smart cities is meant to be seen as a portion of the larger strategy of the government to transition the country swiftly from a predominantly agriculture-based society to an information industrial society. The writer highlights that the main issue with state-led smart cities, like those in China, stems from the fact that ordinary people seldom can voice what they want and need.

In addition, the author explores some private smart city examples. He uses case studies from the United States to demonstrate an understanding of the process of situation that occurs when cities of the future are being created by private technology companies. He examines a few smart city projects run by large U.S. technology firms, ranging from the developed Silicon Valley to the Disney Florida project. At some point, he also comes up with the idea of a company town, referring to a private city operated not only for business purposes but as a business itself. As he notes, private firms are breaking new ground in making smart city projects cost-effective by pushing for the use of advertisements

across the infrastructure of the smart city. But seldom do they consider a smart city's resilience and durability. Consequently, business-controlled smart cities typically have severe transportation problems, huge crises in affordable housing, high wealth inequality, and are least ready to deal with climate change.

The writer then turns his attention to smart cities led by citizens. For him, Barcelona is the leading example of an emerging smart city, in which the involvement of citizens is pivotal. Barcelona's government, in response to strong public pressure, has chosen to renovate its infrastructure at a cost that is affordable and does not rely excessively on the private sector. Moreover, the city has also taken significant steps toward bringing technology and democracy closer together, turning the buzzword of digital democracy into tangible reality. The writer points to many examples, most notably the way in which the government of Barcelona emphasized that its citizens should have access to information when the city concluded its contract with Vodafone. Mosco also looks at citizen-driven initiatives in other cities such as in Seoul, Paris, and Amsterdam. He argues that these citizen-centered smart cities are good democratic replacements for the government and private sector-led smart city creation models. He also examines the potential climate change challenges that smart city projects will face, and he is concerned about that current smart city forms of governance will all be insufficient when it comes to climate change mitigation, because smart cities led by citizens, such as Barcelona, lack a feasible plan to build an energy-positive city.

Mosco then goes on to discuss some aspects of the smart city's cultural dimension. He asserts that smart cities do exist in physical devices, systems, apps, and policies; but more than that, they are also alive in the rhetoric, narratives, mythologies, and commerce that populate the urban fantasy. He starts by examining a series of speeches, mythologies, and fantasies regarding the potential future of the city. These encompass both Howard's garden city and Le Corbusier's modernist vision of the *Cité Radiense*, with its columnar and neo-baroque style buildings. The writer continues to show how the narrative of creative city development drives the beginning of the smart city imagination (getting the creative city narrative much deeper and broader with a rich view of smartness and creativity throughout the metropolis, including daily objects and humans), as well as the way technology companies constructed the discourse of creating the smart city as merely a quest for the proper digital implementations. He also looks at some possible strategies, including marketing and public relations tools that technology companies use to promote their smart city vision and get worldwide governments to support them.

Mosco concludes his book by describing a smart city manifesto. He again stresses the role of people in making a smart city. In fact, what makes cities smart is the shared experience and intelligence of both people who live and work in them, as well as those who

frequent them. Mosco predicts that the objective of smart city technology implementations is not to increase corporate power and profits or government control of its citizens, but rather to contribute to enhancing the life quality and abilities of those living in the city.

In brief, *The Smart City in a Digital World* is a highly thoughtful book, the fruit of Mosco's ongoing and sustained research on both technology and cities. The book is full of substantial experiential data, is frank in its analysis, dynamic in its construction, and lively in its insights. It is one of the most notable books on smart city scholarship in the last few years. Nevertheless, there remain plenty of questions to be answered, including a few that could provide a valuable basis for future research. In my opinion, the key questions that deserve answers are the following: What is the proper way to achieve a balance between dependence on technology and the necessity of allowing a city to develop naturally? What is needed to make people's resilience to the technology-driven smart city a source of inspiration? And what should be done to minimize the increase in government-led and businesscontrolled smart cities worldwide? In fact, as with all successful studies, both the questions raised and the ones already answered in *The Smart City in a Digital World* are equally important and worth some thought.