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Paradise Plundered: Fiscal Crisis and Governance Failures in San Diego, by **Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan, and Scott MacKenzie**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 324pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780804756037.

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Paradise Plundered is a political and sociological analysis of governance in the city of San Diego, California. In 2004 the City of San Diego was dubbed the “Enron-by-the-sea” for its public employee pension fund crisis and related legal battles involving the insolvency of the pension funds, corruption in City Hall, and a budget crisis. These political crises increased as corruption scandals brought further national media attention to the city, with San Diego being called “America’s most dysfunctional city.” Steven Erie, Vladimir Kogan, and Scott MacKenzie took these scandals as their starting point into the city’s political culture and governance problems, but what they unearth is a history and culture of dysfunction at multiple governance levels and across broad organizational and institutional structures of the city, stretching back decades.

Few books are as timely and needed, given the fiscal crises facing so many cities in the United States today. The authors note that fiscal crises are not well studied by social scientists, and even less is known about the ways that governments at the local level respond to fiscal crises. This is an area of scant scholarship. If there is a single area which the book could have improved on, it is the theoretical framing of these issues; however, the limited theoretical discussion is in part due to the fact that so little research exists on this particular topic.

This book draws on a range of sources, primarily public documents, but also interviews, to trace the roots of San Diego’s fiscal and political crises. These data are also combined with financial revenue and expenditure data from the city as well as a host of other quantitative data, giving the work both empirical depth and credibility. The first half of the book is largely historical, tracing

the origins of San Diego’s governance structures, culture, and the emergence of the main players: developers, politicians, industry lobbyists, and outside groups, while the second half pertains more to recent fiscal issues and specific case studies. The historical background is critical in framing the more recent crises.

What the authors establish is a clear set of forces which are historically embedded, but have continued to influence decision making and governance through to the present. These forces can be described as an inability of governing bodies to manage growth in the region effectively, and also to address the broader economic challenges that the region and state has faced. Thus, changes in military spending which hit San Diego with large layoffs, combined with the restriction of tax revenues due to Proposition 13 in California, as well as the introduction of redevelopment law in the 1970s, and the cozy relationship between developers, land speculators, and an anti-tax/anti-regulation political culture, meant that there has been a dysfunctional relationship between government, the private sector, and pressing city needs. In short, instead of raising revenues to pay for vital infrastructure—from roads and storm drains to public safety—San Diego has continued with underfunded public services and infrastructure, and spent tremendous amounts of public resources instead on public/private partnerships such as redevelopment downtown and the building of a new baseball stadium and convention center.

How is it that a city can continue to operate with pension deficits in the millions, inadequate fire station staffing, and the shuttering of public libraries, while at the same time lavishing millions of dollars on professional sports teams and a convention center? The answer provided is a convincing one: that during the 1980s and 90s, when the economy was doing well, San Diego’s leaders drew money from the pension system to fund services that residents wanted but preferred not to pay for, and by the 2000s, the underfunded pension system became a serious drain on the city budget. This led to a vicious cycle: the bond rating of the city was cut, it was more expensive to raise funds through floating new municipal bonds, and in the absence of funding, an already overstretched and in

many cases dilapidated public infrastructure, declined even more. Reform efforts, such as rescheduling pension liabilities, were complicated by the recession and larger pension payments had to be provided for by cuts to other municipal services. All the while, San Diego's fiscal conservatism became even more entrenched as conservatives in the city claimed that raising taxes would only go toward funding public employee pensions and not ailing city services.

Paradise Plundered is organized well and clearly written, and avoids much of the jargon associated with studies of governance, particularly more theoretical approaches. Those seeking a more abstract and theoretical critique will not find it here; this is a study which is well grounded empirically, has real social policy implications, and does not make claims beyond the data. This is not to say that the book is bereft of theoretical insight and discussion, but that there are limited theoretical discussions to inform related debates either within the fields of political science, urban studies, or sociology.

At times the book reads like a passionate critique, potentially raising the specter of objectivity in the analysis, but this critical writing is well deserved given the staggering material which is being discussed. For instance, San Diego's ability to raise funds for fire protection are hampered because people are unwilling to pay more taxes or fees to protect themselves from future disasters. In the past decade, huge wildfires forced hundreds to evacuate; lives were lost, as were homes and properties in the millions of dollars. This is a somber ending to a serious text on dysfunctional governance in a major American city. *Paradise Plundered* should be of great interest to anyone concerned with municipal fiscal crises, political culture, and city governance.

Understanding Suicide: A Sociological Autopsy, by **Ben Fincham, Susanne Langer, Jonathan Scourfield**, and **Michael Shiner**. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 203pp. \$85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780230580923.

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Ever since Durkheim's seminal work, the sociology of suicide has tended to focus on the analysis of suicide rates. Some may even argue that a concern with rates is the defining feature of the sociological approach. But like any other behavior, each suicide occurs in a particular time and place and responds to concrete social conditions, such as the loss of a job or a conflict between spouses. The great advantage of *Understanding Suicide* is that it goes beyond mere rates to discuss the immediate social context in which suicide occurs.

The authors, Ben Fincham, Susanne Langer, Jonathan Scourfield, and Michael Shiner, accomplish this through the analysis of 100 cases of suicide in a mid-sized city in the United Kingdom. Their information comes from the investigative files of the county coroner, which include suicide notes, eyewitness statements, interviews with relatives and friends of the deceased, and the testimony of psychiatrists. These sources allow the authors to conduct what they call a "sociological autopsy"—a post-mortem analysis of the social conditions surrounding individual cases of suicide.

The first three chapters of the book review previous studies of suicide and address broad metatheoretical and methodological questions, culminating in the authors' claim that they seek a middle ground between scientific (the term they use is "objectivist") and interpretive approaches. While these chapters may be educational for newcomers, those already familiar with the suicide literature should probably skip ahead to the meat of the study.

Turning to their data, the authors begin by examining their source of information as a subject in its own right, showing how the informants cited in the coroner's files all have distinctive ways of talking about the