David Kaufmann, *Varieties of Capital Cities: The Competitiveness Challenge for Secondary Capital Cities* by Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018

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David Kaufmann's *Varieties of Capital Cities* is an intriguing read for urban geographers, urban planners, political scientists, and others interested in the policies and nature of cities. Secondary capital cities (SCCs) are those selected or established primarily to serve the governmental institutions of a national government—legislatures, executive offices, judicial functions, and related agencies. They differ structurally from major cities with national or global importance, such as New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, and Istanbul. Most urban geographers focus on major urban centers, overlooking the significance of SCCs, which occupy a unique place in the urban hierarchy. Whether through organic development or directed decision-making, these cities have adapted to an era of globalization. Kaufmann argues that they have developed their own competitive strategies by capitalizing on what they do have: proximity to government. This attracts a specific mix of companies—particularly government contractors in tech and knowledge sectors—along with nonprofits focused on policy advocacy and various service industries. Kaufmann builds a framework for studying these cities and examines four examples: Bern, The Hague, Ottawa, and Washington, D.C. These cities matter, even without the global prominence of Paris, London, or Tokyo. They anchor national governance while developing distinctive economic niches around their governmental functions. Kaufmann's analysis provides a thorough examination of this overlooked category.

Kaufmann employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods. He adds authenticity by spending approximately three months conducting interviews and observing each city's overall character. He primarily uses the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) framework, conceived by Hall and Soskice (2001), which theorizes that firm locations are determined by variables such as labor laws, regulations, taxation, and financial systems (whether stable, market-oriented, or government-controlled). Kaufmann applies this framework, originally designed for analyzing national economies, to SCCs. He argues that the relationship between a country's institutional setup and the unique characteristics of these secondary capitals explains why specific industries cluster there. Government contractors, policy-focused nonprofits, and sectors such as healthcare, education, and IT consistently appear in these cities.

Beyond adapting VoC for SCCs, Kaufmann also draws on Regional Innovation Systems (RIS) theory and Multi-Level Governance (MLG). RIS examines how cities and regions develop innovation capacity and adapt to changing conditions. MLG examines how governance operates across different scales—vertically from global to local—and how various government functions coordinate horizontally. These concepts are useful, but the theoretical integration becomes less coherent here.

The book is most approachable in its city chapters. The historical context adds real depth. Each city was chosen as a capital for specific political reasons—often as a compromise or neutral ground. The Hague was selected for its neutrality. Ottawa sits at the

linguistic border between French and English Canada. Washington, D.C., was positioned between northern and southern states. Bern was selected because it was not a major commercial center like Zurich and sat near the French-speaking portion of Switzerland. Over time, these cities developed industries around their governmental functions: lobbying firms, international organizations, government IT contractors, and in D.C.'s case, a massive defense contracting sector.

However, here is my main criticism: the theoretical framework feels assembled rather than genuinely integrated. Kaufmann jumps between different conceptual approaches but only briefly mentions how they function together. The result reads more like a conceptual toolbox than a coherent framework. Kaufmann's variables and hypotheses would have been strengthened by statistical analysis.

The comparative analysis also reveals limitations. Bern, The Hague, and Ottawa are all relatively compact, government-centered cities. But Washington, D.C., is a different beast entirely. It's a sprawling metro area with not just federal agencies but an enormous ecosystem of private consulting firms and advocacy groups—what Kaufmann calls a "governance-adjacent economy." The scale is completely different. This made me wonder: at what point does a secondary capital become so large and economically complex that it transforms into something else? The book doesn't really tackle this question.

Kaufmann explores two key aspects through which SCCs attempt to shape their competitive advantage: image building and policies. Image building is characteristic of many cities that attempt to brand themselves. SCCs use amenities that project a positive image—museums, universities, parks, and other attractions—to draw people and industries. Additionally, SCCs often pursue deliberate political decisions that favor complementary industries.

One aspect of these established SCCs' ability to plan city structure was overlooked, though this may have been beyond the scope of the book. r could have been incorporated as a horizontal MLG factor. For example, Washington, D.C.'s city plan was established by Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1791 using a baroque-style design with grand diagonal avenues radiating from key points, similar in concept to the later transformation of Paris by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1853-1870). However, it's important to note that L'Enfant's plan predated Haussmann's work by more than six decades and did not directly influence it. Additionally, two other planned cities—Brasília and Canberra—and how their streets and land use were laid out received only brief mention. For instance, Brasília's strict zoning laws created its distinctive superblock layout, separating governmental, residential, and commercial zones, which fundamentally shaped how the city operates and grows. Similarly, Canberra's infrastructure planning, with its emphasis on greenbelts and garden city principles, has directed urban expansion and shaped community patterns. By not delving into these concrete examples, the book misses an opportunity to show how planning strategies and infrastructure investments actively mold the character and economic trajectories of secondary capital cities. Addressing questions such as which zoning approaches foster vibrant policy hubs or how targeted infrastructure spending can catalyze innovation districts would have enriched the analysis and made it more substantive and persuasive. The history of both Canberra and Brasília is discussed in Peter Hall's book, Cities of Tomorrow (Hall, 2014).

Despite these criticisms, I think *Varieties of Capital Cities* makes a real contribution. Kaufmann successfully establishes that secondary capital cities deserve study

as their own category, distinct from both global cities and ordinary regional centers. The comparative method he develops provides a foundation others can build on. Urban planners and economic geographers interested in how political geography shapes urban economies will find this useful.

This would work well as a reading in graduate seminars, especially if students were asked to extend the analysis beyond Kaufmann's four cases. There are obvious candidates: Canberra, Brasília, Ankara, Berlin. Countries with multiple capitals—South Africa, Bolivia—present particularly interesting possibilities. And honestly, African and Southeast Asian capitals are largely missing from this conversation, even though many fit the SCC profile. The EU's various governmental cities—Brussels, Strasbourg, Luxembourg—also seem relevant, functioning as governance centers within a supranational system.

Kaufmann has essentially opened up a research agenda. Future work needs to incorporate planning perspectives more seriously and expand the geographic scope beyond Western democracies. For anyone interested in how political decisions shape cities—their form, their economies, their development trajectories—this book provides a solid starting point, even if it leaves important questions unanswered.

References

Hall, Peter. (2014). Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design Since 1880. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. Accessed November 26, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

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Note: Peter Hall and Peter A. Hall are two different people. Peter Hall (1932-2014) was an English urbanist, geographer, and urban planner, while Peter A. Hall is an American political scientist at Harvard University.