Chapter 48

Power and Urban Politics Revisited: The Uses and Abuses of North American Urban Political Economy

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Urban sociologists and political scientists in the United States have long been preoccupied with the politics of economic development in US cities and the extent to which business communities and business needs shape local policy agendas. These themes were strongly represented in the community power debate between pluralists (Dahl 1961; Banfield 1966; Polsby 1963), elite theorists (Hunter 1953) and neo-elite theorists (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) in the 1950s and 1960s. That debate, in essence, was about whether representative democracy in US cities ensured the diffusion of decision-making power across a broad range of interest groups or was simply a smokescreen behind which power was concentrated in the hands of a small, unrepresentative, business-dominated elite. While the community power debate has an established place in the international urban studies canon, the nature and forms of urban politics described by its various protagonists were generally regarded, outside the US, as highly country-specific.

Ever since the issues covered by that debate resurfaced, in a slightly different guise, in the writings of US urban political economists from the 1980s onward, however, US approaches have generated wider interest. A number of non-US commentators, having noticed more potential parallels between contemporary experiences in the US and elsewhere, have attempted, in particular, to use insights gleaned from two strands of the recent literature – the growth machine thesis (Logan and Molotch 1987) and urban regime theory (Stone and Sanders 1987; Elkin 1987; Stone 1989) – to underpin both non-US and cross-national analyses of the changing nature of urban politics and intervention (Harding 1999). This chapter asks why this reevaluation has occurred and examines the extent to which recent US approaches have been, and can be, useful to researchers in other national contexts. The first section outlines the two US approaches. A second section asks why they have been taken up by urban researchers outside the US and, focusing primarily upon UK work, illustrates both how they have been adapted for non-US study and the main problems that have arisen from attempts to do so. The final section asks what value remains in

the two strands of US urban political economy once the major criticisms have been taken into consideration and outlines ways in which they might be made more useful for non-US urban political analysis.

Urban Regimes and Growth Machines: A Brief Summary

Both strands of recent US urban political economy emphasize the importance of coalition building, on one hand, and the urban politics of production – that is, attempts to strengthen local economies and promote employment growth – on the other. Their main focus is upon the way various "stakeholders," particularly from urban governments and local business communities, use their resources to support deliberate, strategic economic development initiatives. This distinguishes them from "structuralist" approaches – the dominant strands of urban theory immediately before and after the community power debate – which tended to ignore strategic decision making and made it appear that patterns of urban change were ordered by intangible mechanisms such as the "hidden hand of the market," the nature of capitalist social relations or quasi-biological "impersonal competition" (Logan and Molotch 1987: 4–12). Most important to the theorists themselves, though, it distinguishes their arguments from those advanced by Peterson in a book entitled *City Limits* (Peterson 1981; Logan and Swanstrom 1990).

Peterson saw the importance of the urban politics of production as being linked directly to US local authorities' limited capacity to engage in "redistributive politics"; that is, to use locally raised resources to support service provision which primarily benefits poorer urban residents. While not disputing the importance of local developmental politics and the fact that local administrations compete for firms and households, the new urban political economy rejected two features of Peterson's analysis. The first is his assertion that local politics hardly matters and that the environment in which city administrations operate determines all their significant choices. The second is his implication that cities have a single set of interests which can be understood without reference to preferences that are expressed, by city residents and users, through the political system or other channels.

Thus the advocates of the new urban political economy took issue with Peterson for the way he reached his conclusions (Sanders and Stone 1987a, 1987b; Peterson 1987), if not necessarily with the conclusions themselves. Their major goal was to put the politics back into urban political economy. Like the community power theorists they attempt to account for important aspects of urban change by examining the actions of the groups, individuals, and institutions that help produce them rather than assuming that people are swept along by larger forces over which they have no control. They insist that there is nothing automatic about the interactions between "urban elites" and the effects which flow from them. For them, cities and urban life are produced and reproduced, not by the playing out of some externally imposed logic, but by struggles and bargains between different groups and interests within (and beyond) cities. The outcomes of these struggles and bargains, they argue, far from serving the general "good of the city," reward some groups while disadvantaging others.

The way in which the two accounts approach the key issue of coalition building, however, is somewhat different. Urban regime theorists, drawing upon general neo-

pluralist arguments about the interdependency of politics and markets (e.g. Lindblom 1977), accentuate the political. They focus upon the way in which urban local authorities, when seeking to achieve their aims, rely upon the support of external organizations and interests. The nature of the regimes those authorities seek to build depends upon the aims themselves, which in turn reflect the broader socioeconomic environments relevant to particular places and times, and the division of labor between various organizations and interests whose support is needed to realize them. The key to their analysis in all cases, however, is the observation that "successful electoral coalitions do not necessarily govern" (Stone and Sanders 1987: 286). In other words, in order to achieve anything beyond straightforward statutory tasks – particularly when their ambitions depend upon inducing market change – elected city leaders and their officials need the support of other powerful interests, especially within the business community.

Thus urban regimes bring together those who have access to, and can deliver, various resources, be they material, such as finance, personnel, and land and buildings, or intangibles such as political, regulatory, and informational resources. Since no single organization or group monopolizes these assets and there is no "conjoining structure of command" (Stone 1989: 5) to link asset-holders together, a regime is an informal mechanism for "civic cooperation," based upon mutual self-interest, "by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions" (Stone 1989: 6). Regimes fuse what is otherwise a very fragmented capacity to act and enable independent social forces and organizations to coordinate their actions in a way they would not otherwise do over the range of issues upon which they can agree.

While it is intrinsic to the arguments of regime theorists that the needs and demands of business leaders will always tend to limit and help determine the options pursued by urban authorities, the channel of influence they identify runs from the public to the private sector. The growth machine thesis, by contrast, accentuates the economic and sees the flow of influence as running in the opposite direction. Logan and Molotch's arguments are founded upon the assertion (1987: 52) that "the activism of entrepreneurs is, and always has been, a critical force in shaping the urban system." They focus upon the way growth strategies are defined and promulgated by local business communities. The growth machine thesis offers finer-grained detail about who plays leading roles in growth strategies. For Logan and Molotch, the key to the growth machine is the way local land and property owners ("parochial capital") strive to maximize rental income by intensifying or changing the uses to which their geographically fixed assets are put. To do this successfully, they need the support of other business interests whose success depends upon local markets (e.g. local banks, media and utilities companies), nonlocal investors ("metropolitan capital"), and local authorities which, it is argued, are "primarily concerned with increasing growth" (Logan and Molotch 1987: 53).

Quite why this is seen as being so in most, but not all, cases is not satisfactorily resolved by Logan and Molotch. At certain points they, like other urban political economists (Clavel 1986; DeLeon 1992), suggest urban political leaderships can follow anti- or controlled-growth strategies. At others they argue, like the much-derided Peterson, that certain institutional features in the US system of local government predispose local authorities toward competitive, growth-orientated behavior.

And at yet other points it is implied that local public officials have some freedom of maneuver with respect to the politics of production but fail to use it. Like other interests, they can be seduced by the ideology of "value-free development" promulgated by core growth machine activists.

Urban regime theory, by contrast, sees little role for ideology in binding coalitions together. For Stone, in particular, the power of a regime lies in the fact that it can draw in a multitude of different, often ideologically incongruent, interests without there needing to be a meeting of minds on all issues. All that is required is for regime members to work together constructively on those issues upon which they can agree and not to let their disagreements threaten the integrity of the regime. Thus regime members support growth strategies because they calculate that the material benefits of having influence as a "supportive" insider are greater than those that might accrue from being a critical outsider. It is these material calculations, more than anything else, which Stone has in mind when he argues that the opponents of a broad-based, well-organized regime can win battles against particular development projects but rarely the war against growth politics in its broadest sense.

Regimes and Machines beyond the US

Urban regime theory and the growth coalition thesis attracted interest in other national contexts for two main reasons. First, an international process of economic restructuring and the dilemmas it posed for local economies and labor markets in the "advanced" economies resulted in the urban politics of production becoming more important irrespective of national boundaries. And second, there were patchy but internationally significant changes in the structures, forms, and aims of the primary agencies of local service delivery – local authorities – which resulted in processes of coalition formation becoming more salient. The scale and depth of these changes in the UK, in particular, posed problems for traditional approaches to urban political analysis which primarily focused upon local government politics and administration, relations between national and local governments, and the delivery of social and welfare services (i.e. the politics of consumption rather than production). These institutional and policy-based approaches addressed a crucial issue within postwar urban politics – the role of local government within the developing national welfare state – but by the late 1980s they were becoming untenable as a result of four factors.

The first was fragmentation in the institutional structures of local governance whose origins were found primarily, but not exclusively, in the "market-led" reforms of post-1979 Conservative governments (Stewart and Stoker 1989, 1994). These resulted in the delivery of local, publicly funded services by a growing range of unelected public agencies, voluntary organizations, and private firms. The second, as noted above, was the growing importance of the urban politics of production. This was best illustrated by the rapid growth in economic programs run by area-based agencies, be they local authorities, nonstatutory bodies, or government-appointed agencies (Eisenschitz and Gough 1994). The third change was the proliferation of public–private partnerships, notably as hybrid delivery agencies for local economic programs (Bailey et al. 1995). The fourth was the steady, government-induced metamorphosis of local authorities into enabling, rather than executive, bodies

(Wilson and Game 1994; Clarke and Stewart 1994) which inadvertently encouraged them to take a broader but less directive role across a range of local economic and social affairs.

The advantages of growth machine and urban regime approaches, then, were that they offered conceptual frameworks which linked together many aspects of the "new urban governance" while at the same time leaving a great deal open to empirical investigation. Thus US urban political economy approaches became more relevant beyond the US than their predecessors had been in an earlier period. That does not mean, however, that there has been much clarity about how the insights of US urban political economy could or should be applied in non-US contexts and what should be the primary focus of research. In fact the two approaches have been applied in very different ways.

Concentrating upon work within the UK, there are three clear differences from the sorts of approaches that might be expected from the original US sources. The first is the emphasis placed upon the actions of public sector agencies in general and local authorities in particular. For Bassett and Harloe, for example, the key to the Swindon growth machine was the way in which the local council took advantage of national policy shifts which supported economic and population expansion for much of the postwar period (Bassett 1990; Bassett and Harloe 1990). Similarly, Dunleavy et al. (1995) focus upon the degree to which council leaderships in London achieved backing for particular policy developments from national government and/or benefited, inadvertently or by design, from national policy change. In neither account is much reference made to the role of the private sector in coalition building or in influencing the nature and direction of local strategies. Neither do they examine the mechanics of coalition building between different parts of the public sector.

Second, even when UK research *has* adopted the American emphasis upon public–private sector relationships, it has focused upon institutionalized forms of collaboration. While urban America contains countless examples of public–private and nonprofit organizations, these rarely lie at the center of the analyses of US urban political economists. By contrast, in the UK, the dominant focus is upon public private partner*ships*, as institutions, rather than upon noninstitutionalized public private partner*ship*, as a process. As a result, a great deal of attention is paid to two kinds of institutionalized partnership: (1) what might be called "shotgun partnerships" (Harding 1998), that is, formalized public–private partnership machinery which is required by government at the national or European level in order to trigger the flow of various forms of discretionary funding, and (2) "bottom up partnerships" which, although they often rely on external government support, are more clearly driven by local interests (Ward 1996; Axford and Pinch 1994; Lloyd and Newlands 1988). Such analyses, although useful in their own terms, are much less wide-ranging in their scope and ambition than the better US regime studies (see, above all, Stone 1989).

A final difference concerns the question "When is a regime/machine not a regime/machine?" and, in particular, just how robust and long-lived a particular set of public–private, intergovernmental and/or interagency relationships need to be in order to be considered as a regime/growth machine. Sanders, Elkin, Logan, and Molotch – and Stone, in all but his most recent work (1997) – each imply that

sustained relationships over a long period of time are defining features of regimes and growth machines. But the same criterion has not usually been adopted when interpreting the UK experience. Partly this is a reflection of the more institutional focus of much UK work and the fact that the institutional partnerships associated with particular public programs usually have a lifespan limited by that of the programs themselves. However, it also reflects a tendency to assume that regimes or growth machines can be found in all places at all times.

One extreme illustration of this tendency is Kantor et al.'s (1997) use of the label "radical regime" to describe the Trotsky-influenced Labour Party leadership of Liverpool City Council in the mid-1980s even though (1) its dominance within city politics lasted for barely a single electoral cycle of four years, and (2) during that time it alienated virtually every potential ally inside and outside the city whose support was needed to tackle the city's acute economic and social problem. Kantor et al. are not alone in using the term "regime" to describe internal political and executive leadership groups within local authorities rather than the broader, informal coalitions referred to by the likes of Stone, Sanders, and Elkin. However, such indiscriminate use of the term means there is a danger that it loses its precision and becomes "a new descriptive catchword . . . in place of an explanation of the phenomenon under question" (Stoker 1995: 62. See also Harding 1997; John and Cole 1998).

Reflections on the Uses and Abuses of American Urban Political Economy

It is clear, then, that researchers have found compelling reasons to adopt approaches associated with urban regime theory and the growth coalition thesis in analyzing the changing patterns and processes of urban governance in the UK, but that their efforts are associated with substantial problems. Whether the blame for this should lie with the theorists or those who apply the theories, though, is the subject of dispute between those who argue that US urban political economy does not provide researchers studying UK towns and cities – or indeed those in Europe more generally – with particularly useful analytic tools (Shaw 1994; Le Galès 1995; Wood 1996) and more sympathetic commentators who see potential in US approaches *if* they can be attuned more carefully to non-US circumstances (Keating 1991; Stoker and Mossberger 1994; Newman 1995; Stoker 1995; Ward 1996).

Central to both positions is the argument that US approaches are ethnocentric; in other words, that the economic, institutional, political, and cultural environment of the US is taken as a natural starting point for analysis. This is clearly a valid criticism. As Logan and Molotch (1987: 149) recognize, there are some key differences between the US and the UK – and Europe, more generally – which affect the importance of urban coalition formation and the degree of emphasis on local growth politics. Among the more important are the following:

1. The stronger role that business leaders play in US urban politics; either directly, as politicians, or indirectly, for example through the control of slating organizations which choose electoral candidates or the provision of campaign funds, particularly for city mayors.

2. The absence of a major nonbusiness political party in the US comparable to the social democratic, trades-union-based parties which tend to dominate urban politics in Europe.
3. A highly autonomous system of local land-use planning in the US compared to the European experience in which local planning tends to be regulated more heavily by higher levels of government.
4. A much weaker role for the public sector in the US in respect of the ownership, acquisition, servicing, and development of land.
5. A much greater reliance on the part of US local authorities on local funding sources, be they revenues raised from local businesses and residents or capital resources borrowed from private creditors through local bonds.

Taken together, these factors mean that the business voice in urban politics in the US is much stronger and there is a more direct trade-off between the ability of US local authorities to provide services and the buoyancy of local economies than there is in the UK/Europe, where the resources for urban service provision are redistributed at a national scale according to local needs. While it might be valid to question the extent to which some UK analyses based upon US urban political economy have failed to enquire into the development of public–private sector relationships, then, this criticism must be seen in context. Even those studies which have searched more carefully for regimes and growth machines of the type described in the US literature have ultimately argued that the public sector in Europe plays a much greater role in the urban politics of production than it does in the US. As a result, the roles of national and local governments, of other public and quasi-public sector bodies, and of intergovernmental relations invariably receive more attention outside the US. This is true not just in the UK context but in work on other European countries (see Strom 1996, on Germany; Terhorst and van de Ven 1995, on the Netherlands; and John and Cole 1998, on France).

It follows from this argument that, if more mileage is to be gained from the application of US urban political economy approaches in other national contexts, two things are needed. First, a more disciplined approach is needed to the testing of some of their key propositions. Second, more serious attempts are needed to grapple with their limitations, including the ethnocentricity of the literature. In other words, just as the work of Sanders, Stone, Elkin, Logan, and Molotch helped put the politics back into urban political economy, so the challenge for non-US researchers is to take the US out of US urban political economy and make best use of what remains.

In this regard, it is critical that future efforts put the "micro-diversity" of urban coalitions into a context of "macro-necessities" originating beyond the boundaries of any particular city or, indeed, nation (Jessop et al. 1996). One of the main limitations of the US literature when it comes to cross-national analysis is that while it encourages a focus upon the urban politics of production, it cannot explain its growing salience in different national contexts. This is unsurprising, given the unwritten assumption that urban growth politics is intrinsic to the American system of governance rather than an occasional feature which has recently become more important. The key issue outside the US, however, is not so much how enduring features of the institutional landscape generate growth politics but how recent changes have added to the momentum behind the urban politics of production.

A more holistic perspective is therefore needed to make sense of cross-national change. This, in turn, means drawing upon overarching theories of the state which can provide the basis for understanding common, cross-national changes in governmental structures and modes of operation.

Promising developments along these lines are already apparent in work which has attempted to link regulation theory – and the insights it provides into the processes of cross-national state restructuring and the growing importance of subnational economic development initiatives – to urban regime theory and its concern to explore the way in which local interests respond to changes in the urban economic and political environment (Jessop et al. 1996; Lauria 1997; Harding 1997). The value of such a link, however, would be demonstrated more clearly if the key propositions of both approaches were translated more rigorously into programs of empirical research. There is also a need to explore the way in which the urban politics of production, outside the US, is related to the urban politics of welfare and social provision. One line of argument that would repay further exploration, here, is that effective urban regimes or coalitions in Europe, rather than being associated primarily with the promotion of economic growth, are best defined as informal arrangements by which the pursuit of economic development is reconciled with the attainment of social and environmental goals. That agenda is clearly becoming more important as debates about the importance of social cohesion and environmental sustainability to long-term economic change are taken more seriously.

These concluding comments suggest that US urban political economy, as originally conceived, clearly has limitations for the purposes of non-US and/or cross-national analyses of urban politics and intervention. More positively, however, it has hopefully made two points in relation to this observation. First, that some of the core features of US urban political economy are worth retaining and building upon, even if they were not designed to be used cross-nationally. And second, that there is a realistic prospect of developing a political economy approach to urban coalition formation which can yield insights that commentators in the UK and the rest of Europe will find useful.

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