



For a Critique of the Liberal Foundations of American Cities

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Profoundly touched by the consequences of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, David Imbroscio seeks concrete political solutions to transform American cities. In order to do so, he calls for an epistemological repositioning that necessitates abandoning the dominant philosophical foundations of liberalism in the United States, and this as much by academia as by the political Left. This critical and pragmatic project is developed in a recent book, Urban America reconsidered, which he discusses here.

I approached this project as an American, as an urbanist, and as a critical scholar – one who cares deeply about the ailing of his nation and its cities and believes deeply in the potential of *critical* urban research to contribute to a healing. I conceived it while haunted and enraged – haunted by the television pictures from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and enraged that such a horrible thing could happen here, in my country, with its fabulous wealth and profoundly democratic pretensions.

Over several years of study and consideration I have come to believe that only part of the blame for the urban ills of America lies with those who resist democracy and reject justice in favor of inequality and injustice. Equally at fault are those who care deeply about the ends of justice and democracy in cities but are misguided as to means. These persons, who embrace the philosophical framework and programmatic agenda of *liberalism*, fail to understand – and face up to – what is required to achieve such ends. And the costs of this failure have been enormous. For over a half century, misguided liberal policies and strategies have more often than not been as destructive to cities and their people and institutions as they have been ameliorative. As a result, human suffering has intensified and urban democracy has remained emasculated.

Beyond liberalism

My first key aim is thus to critique this liberalism – both in its philosophical and programmatic manifestations. While much recent critical urban scholarship has focused on liberalism’s *neo* form (involving especially the rollback of the state over the past three decades), it is my contention that the real problem lies with liberalism itself, in all its forms, including its more appealing New Deal/Great Society variety (which is a “close [American] first cousin” (Elkin 2006, p. 26) to European social democracy). This more appealing version of liberalism, in the American context, relies on an activist and interventionist government to solve urban problems via state-directed redistributive and regulatory efforts, while at the same leaving the fundamentals of corporate ownership and control of economic institutions wholly intact. It also has strong proclivities toward the centralization of political power, as the preferred scale of state activism is on the national (or federal) level. This centralization, in the (American) liberal view, is seen as desirable because it supposedly facilitates more egalitarian and rational policy outcomes.

A recent insight offered by the progressive geographer Mark Purcell nicely captures the inspiration behind a second key aim of this project. While recognizing such a characterization “slightly overdraws the picture,” Purcell (2004, p. 764-765) points out, perceptively, that “the urban policy debate in the US is dominated by liberals and neoliberals,” while critical scholars (such as, most importantly, those grounded in Marxist political economy) only “observe and critique.” In light of this reality, he suggests it is “imperative” for critical scholarship “to leave the audience and enter the debate.” An “effective way to do so,” adds Purcell, is to proffer policy proposals that both critique and offer concrete alternatives to the liberal and neoliberal visions. Whether or not such policy proposals are actually realized, they would at least begin to nudge the debate off its current liberal/neoliberal axis. What is more, they can introduce alternatives to the contemporary capitalist city into a discourse that sorely needs them.

In line with this exhortation, in this project I attempt to introduce such alternatives into this discourse by offering the kinds of concrete, but critical, policy proposals that can rival those of liberalism and neo-liberalism. For too long, as Purcell notes, critical urban scholars (including Marxian ones) have been mere audience members in the urban policy debate, with – I would add – devastating consequences for cities and their citizens.

With the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, there is again a renewed optimism (or hope) in the possibility that liberalism can save America’s cities. My analysis, however, suggests that this optimism is again misguided – as it was in the late-1940s, the mid-1960s, the late-1970s, and the mid-1990s. During each of those eras, liberalism produced its rather predictable results – and hopes for a rebirth of urban democracy and a significant amelioration of urban problems were quickly dashed. Of course only the unfolding of history will judge whether I am indeed correct in this assessment.

Nevertheless, if, as all early indicators suggest, I am correct, it seems as imperative as ever to forge a new way. As we have recently seen, the larger-order economic and financial institutions in America – constructed, defended, and propped up by political liberals as much as neo-liberals and conservatives – have revealed themselves to be even more corrupt, more rotted, and more enfeebled than almost anyone imagined. Contrary to the beliefs of most liberals, we seem to stand on the precipice of what political economist and social theorist Gar Alperovitz (2005, p. 3) aptly identifies as a “*systemic crisis*” – an historical era where “the political-economic system must slowly lose legitimacy because the realities it produces contradict the values it proclaims.” Solving such a crisis, Alperovitz adds, ultimately requires – by definition – the “development of a new system.”

While my analysis below focuses more narrowly on developing alternatives for cities, rather than on comprehensive political-economic system change, it does nevertheless hint at what such a new system in the broader sense might look like. Inspired by Alperovitz’s vision, that new system would be one that is decentralized, egalitarian, community-oriented, republican, and entrepreneurial – and where property ownership and control (“the locus of real power in most systems,” as Alperovitz (2005, p. 5) reminds us), would be structured in an altogether different manner. It is thus my hope that this project can, in some small way, contribute to the larger-order, long-term project of replacing the current dysfunctional political-economic system in America with one that better fulfills the aspirations of its citizens to build a more just, democratic, and prosperous nation.

Reconsidering Urban America

Over the past two decades two related but distinct orthodoxies have taken hold within the academic study of urban America. Both are grounded in elements of philosophical liberalism. Both, also, are deeply misguided. The first, *urban regime theory*, concerns urban governance in American cities; the second, what I call *liberal expansionism* (also known as “*new regionalism*”) concerns urban policy for addressing the problems faced by American cities. It is the central argument of this

project that both of these orthodoxies need to be challenged, reconsidered, and, ultimately, reformulated with or replaced by superior alternatives.

While these two orthodoxies consume and adversely affect the academic realm, they also have significant deleterious impacts on *real world political practice*. Thus the ultimate goal of this project is an eminently practical one. The state of governance in urban America, a nation professing to democratic and egalitarian ideals, is dismal; the degree of human suffering resulting from America's entrenched urban problems, severe.

First conceived by scholars in the early to mid-1980s, urban regime theory soon became the dominant mode of urban political analysis. Most important tenet of regime theory is the idea that urban political processes are "largely a consequence of the division of labor between state and market as that is manifest in cities" of capitalist democracies like the United States (Elkin 1987, p. 18). Urban regime theory centrally holds that, because this division of labor estranges public power from economic activity, the local state is left too weak to accomplish the complex policy tasks required to govern the city effectively. Therefore, local public officials need to form cooperative arrangements with nongovernmental (private) actors to create a capacity for effective governance. These (largely informal) arrangements between public officials and private actors are called "urban regimes" or, more concretely, "governing coalitions" (Stone 1989, p. 5).

Of late the dominant, indeed almost hegemonic, policy approach embraced by American urbanists to address urban problems has been what I term liberal expansionism (New Regionalism). This approach combines a liberal political philosophy (in the contemporary, American sense) with the idea that the social and economic problems of America's central cities can only be solved by "playing the outside game" (Rusk 1999, p. 11). Central cities are failing, according to this perspective, because they (and their poorer residents) are too isolated – governmentally, politically, socially, fiscally, and economically – especially from their wider metropolitan regions as well as from the resources of other extra-city institutions such as higher-level governments and large philanthropic foundations. The antidote to this multifaceted isolation is expansion – that is, creating governmental, political, social, fiscal, and economic linkages between the central city (and its population) and institutions and resources existing beyond its boundaries.

The Limits of Urban Regime Theory and Liberal Expansionism

By the mid-1990s, urban regime theory emerged as the dominant, even orthodox, way to understand the nature of governance in urban America. Urban regime theory's dominance did not immunize it against criticism, however. In fact, over the past decade and a half, scholars have proffered a number of sympathetic critiques of it. Yet, what is most surprising given the volume of, and variation in, such critiques is that so little attention has been paid to the theory's most foundational and arguably most important element – *the division of labor between state and market*. Conventional urban regime theory conceptualizes the division of labor in overly rigid and largely static terms.

The root of these missteps lies in conventional urban regime theory's failure to engage economic questions in a sustained and systematic way. This failure has left it with deep deficiencies. These deficiencies once again weaken urban regime theory not only as an explanatory theory, but as a prescriptive one as well.

The discussion now moves from a reconsideration of how American urban *governance* might be progressively reconstructed to a reconsideration of how urban *policy* might best address America's urban problems. Central to this shift is the critique of what I called the "liberal expansionism" and especially of the case made by liberal expansionists against *the inside game*. This inside game involves, most notably, the place-oriented, community development approach to addressing urban problems, as well as the internal policy actions and institutional capacities of central cities themselves (also see Dreier *et al.* 2004). It is this case against the inside game as a losing strategy

for cities and urban neighborhoods – what I refer to as the *shaming of the inside game* – that provides the empirical basis behind the clarion call for expansionist urban policies. It is my central contention that shaming of the inside game relies more on the liberal value commitments of expansionists themselves rather than on careful empirical analysis.

One salient element of liberal expansionism has garnered an especially orthodox hold on that discourse: The idea that the amelioration of urban problems requires, almost above or prior to all else, the central city's poor be deconcentrated – that is, dispersed – into wealthier (usually suburban) neighborhoods. Thus the general challenge to liberal expansionism demands special critical analysis be devoted to (what I refer to as) the *Dispersal Consensus*. My analysis successfully challenges the Dispersal Consensus's near hegemonic influence over policy discourse. Such a challenge in turn demands that other paths for addressing America's urban problems be explored.

Alternatives

Both the reconsideration of urban governance and the reconsideration urban policy point to the significance of the local economic alternative development strategies (or LEADS) for both undertakings. A deep philosophical liberalism lies at the heart of the failure of both conventional urban regime theory and liberal expansionism. Thus, remedying this failure requires developing an alternative approach that moves away from such a philosophy. One such approach, developed below, has at its core an array of *local economic alternative development strategies* (or LEADS for short). These LEADS have three key attributes:

- Broadening Ownership;
- Democratizing Control;
- Valuing Place and Community.

The LEADS hold the key to both strengthening the explanatory and, especially, the prescriptive elements of urban regime theory, while providing a means to address urban problems superior to liberal expansionism.

The public balance sheet (PBS) concept places the conceptual focus of policymaking squarely on the issue of the extent to which public (or community) benefits actually result from local development expenditures. So, at the most basic level, the PBS concept frames the policy question sharply in terms of the public vs. the private: While local economic development efforts may aid corporations and other businesses – enhancing private balance sheets – the call to employ a PBS suggests a possible disjunction between such private benefits and those accruing to the public or the community at-large.

In order to move toward the two central constructive goals set forth in my book – progressive urban regime reconstruction and urban problem amelioration – much more must be done to better realize basic community economic stability. The basic economic development problematic that must be overcome is three-fold: first, the conditions must be right to capture capital investment initially; second, such captured investment must be augmented by ensuring it yields the maximum advantage to the local economy; and, third, mechanisms must be in place to root this investment securely in place (the inducing, multiplying, and anchoring triad).

Conclusion: A Beginning, Not an End

Taken together, the preceding sections have exposed the misguided nature of the two orthodoxies that have taken hold within the academic study of urban America – conventional urban regime theory's understanding of the nature of urban governance and liberal expansionism's understanding

of the policies to address urban problems. To fully comprehend the nature of this potential of an alternative politics, we need to evaluate the particular practices constituting the politics of the LEADS. On this score, it is reasonably clear that the politics of the LEADS faces some deep normative challenges. It appears such challenges can be adequately addressed. But, while the politics of the LEADS may well be normatively desirable, that matters little if it cannot be feasibly practiced. While there are many formidable constraints on the politics of the LEADS, such constraints are not utterly insurmountable.

My objective in this project, taken as a whole, has been to initiate a conversation where urbanists give due reconsideration to the orthodoxies of conventional urban regime theory and liberal expansionism, while also engaging the primer on the LEADS alternatives. The ultimate goal of initiating this conversation is eminently practical: It is hoped that such discourse can be translated into tangible actions – actions that help relieve the human suffering from America’s urban problems (laid so bare by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina), while making urban governance (via progressive regime reconstruction) once again the pride of American democracy. With such practical considerations foremost in our minds: Let the conversation begin.

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