Urban Politics: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue

KEVIN WARD and DAVID IMBROSCIO with contributions by Deborah Martin, Clarence Stone & Robert Whelan, Faranak Miraftab and Allan Cochrane

Abstract

Urban politics is a multidisciplinary field, in other words a number of bits — so to speak — of different disciplines work on it. While those in political science might claim to produce the bulk of the work in this field, others in anthropology, economics, human geography, planning, social policy and sociology can also claim to be making a contribution. The introduction situates the six sections comprising this essay, in which contributors discuss what their respective disciplines bring to the wider field of ‘urban politics’ and highlight some possible areas for future work.

Introduction

The intellectual starting point for this essay was, with hindsight, the 1995 publication of Theories of Urban Politics. Edited by David Judge, Gerry Stoker and Harold Wolman — three eminent political scientists — this collection aimed to ‘bring together leading scholars from both sides of the Atlantic to explain and assess the major theories underpinning the study of urban politics’ (Judge et al., 1995: 1). Consisting of 14 chapters, it was organized into four sections: ‘understanding urban power’, ‘urban government and democracy’, ‘urban politics and citizens’ and ‘urban politics, the state and capitalist society’. The classic, traditional theories of urban politics — ‘pluralism’, ‘elite theory,’ ‘regime theory’ and ‘Marxism’ — were each given a chapter, alongside discussions of various other issues such as the role of bureaucrats, citizenship and women. The collection was essential reading for any graduate student in the social sciences interested in the field of ‘urban politics’. That was certainly the case for both editors of this Debates contribution. While the volume has its limits — an overemphasis on (local) government, a rather formal and absolutist theorization of ‘power’, limited...
geographical reference points and a failure to consider the politics lying behind the construction of ‘the urban’ itself (to name but four) — nevertheless, this collection did capture a moment of tendencial convergence in the study of urban politics.

Fast forward 14 years and a second edition of *Theories of Urban Politics* hits the academic bookshelves. This time it is edited by Jonathan Davies and David Imbroscio, to whom the editorial torch was passed by Judge, Stoker and Wolman. While political science is still central, they acknowledge that ‘urban politics is a pluralistic subfield … [drawing] … from sibling social science and humanities disciplines spanning at least history, economics, geography, philosophy and law’ (Davies and Imbroscio, 2009a: xi). In this spirit there is a more generous understanding of politics as both a discipline and a set of practices. At times there remains some slippage between urban political science — as a specific subfield of political science — and the broader, more inclusive term, ‘urban politics’, over which a number of disciplines might justifiably make some claims. Representative of this slippage is the editors’ situating of political science so centrally: ‘Urban politics’, as they see it, ‘will continue to transgress and engage in productive dialogue with other disciplines; particularly economics, sociology and geography’ (Davies and Imbroscio, 2009b: 13).

Nevertheless, intellectual space is opened up in the book for the potential contributions of bits of other disciplines to the theorization of urban politics. While the structure is similar to the first edition, and there is a substantial overlap in terms of the material covered and the participating contributors, the second edition of *Theories of Urban Politics* does offer the possibility of a wider interdisciplinary (or even post-disciplinary) conversation on how to theorize urban politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This is the jumping-off point for this essay. It stems from two events. The first was a seminar at the University of Manchester, which revealed that while scholars of politics (or political science) ‘naturally’ see the study of politics on the urban scale (that is, urban politics) to be within their disciplinary domain — their ‘turf,’ so to speak — scholars from numerous other disciplines (especially, of late, geography and urban planning) have also written extensively about urban politics. Building upon this insight, the second event was a panel session at the 2010 Association of American Geographers Annual Conference in Washington, DC. Shifting the debate away from the political science conferences at which the second edition of *Theories of Urban Politics* was discussed on multiple occasions (Davies and Imbroscio, 2009b), the panel was assembled deliberately to include representation from a number of disciplines, namely geography, planning, political science and social policy. It was then interdisciplinary by nature. The six short contributions featured here represent responses to a series of questions asked of them by the editors:

- Where does ‘urban politics’ sit intellectually within your discipline? Is it a central feature or on the margins?
- What and where is ‘the urban’? Is the urban better theorized as a territorial expression or an arena/meeting ground in which stretched relations come together temporarily?
- What is ‘politics’? Is it more than government? Who does and does not get included in your discipline’s definition of politics?
- How does your discipline approach methodologically the field of ‘urban politics’?

As might be expected, there are a number of differences between the contributions. These reflect the different disciplines’ take, so to speak, on ‘urban politics’. This diversity is no bad thing. It reflects strong disciplinary traditions. However, there are also a series of issues that appear in more than one contribution, and perhaps speak to some possible fruitful points of future engagement between the different disciplines. Three stand out. The first is that of space and scale. This is the intellectual bread and butter of geography, but is also a field that others working in cognate disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, have considered. For example, Low (1999) and Jessop *et al.*
(2008) have both advanced understandings of spatiality from outside of geography. In this vein, Cochrane, Martin and Ward each draw attention to the need to think seriously about what is understood as ‘the urban’. On the one hand, contributors acknowledge that there is a scalar and spatial politics to the construction of ‘the urban’ and those whose interests go into its constitution. There is a politics of scale and of space in other words. While different disciplines tend to use different language — for example, geographers use ‘scale’ while political scientists use ‘levels’ — there is some convergence regarding the need to question their pre-given and so-called ‘natural’ status. On the other hand, while there remains mileage in working with traditional territorial understandings of ‘the urban’, a case is made by both Cochrane and Ward to take seriously more relational conceptualizations of space. Thinking about how ‘the global’ is in ‘the urban’ and ‘the urban’ is in ‘the global’ is a concern that permeates a number of the contributions, and reflects a wider intellectual current across the social sciences. Cox’s (1995) term the ‘new urban politics’ (NUP) was an attempt to capture this, as was Swyngedouw’s (1997) ‘glocalization’ and Jessop and Sum’s (2000) ‘glurbanization’. Neologisms abound, as scholars have sought out a vocabulary to capture the complexity of the current urban political condition. The relational take on ‘urban politics’ is neatly explained by Allen and Cochrane (2007: 1171, original emphasis):

Increasingly, it would seem that there is little to be gained by talking about . . . [urban] . . . governance as a territorial arrangement when a number of the political elements assembled . . . are ‘parts’ of elsewhere, representatives of professional authority, expertise, skills and interests drawn together to move forward varied agendas and programmes . . . There is . . . an interplay of forces where a range of actors mobilize, enrol, translate, channel, broker and bridge in ways that make different kinds of government possible.

The second issue that appears in more than one contribution is what is meant by ‘politics’. Cochrane, Imbroscio, Martin, Miraftab and Ward touch upon this issue. For mainstream political scientists, politics is often (although of course not always) no more than what governments do. Both Martin and Miraftab emphasize the importance of other actors in addition to governments in urban politics. In the case of urban planning, for example, there has been a sense that a range of actors should be involved in decision-making. Community groups, housing tenants, voluntary organizations: all are increasingly part of a broader understanding of who is involved in urban politics. For some scholars working in this intellectual field this is a normative position. It reflects a pronouncement that politics should involve not just government. Others too should be involved in the negotiations and struggles over sociospatial processes. This also means — as Miraftab explains — thinking about both formal and informal politics characterizes current planning scholarship. For Imbroscio, his concern is over the relationship between politics and power. Pluralist accounts of power still dominate, at least in US political science. These fail to deal adequately with the interlocking and mutually constitutive dynamics of the economy and the polity. Cochrane and Ward also point to another weakness in this conception of power, which tends to be underpinned by an absolutist rather than a relational understanding. In it, power is a ‘thing’ that can be won or lost, something over which struggles occur. That may be how it is represented. However, power can also be conceived as relational (Allen, 2003). Working in this vein, the state’s powers do not fit neatly into a predetermined spatiality, whether vertical or horizontal. Rather, distant powers intersect with more proximate modes, suggesting a more transverse set of government interactions (Allen and Cochrane, 2010).

The third issue that runs through a number of contributions is the relationship between structure and agency. This is raised by Martin, and Stone and Whelan. For Martin, understanding urban politics means acknowledging the simultaneity of structure and agency. Past studies in Marxist-inspired urban geography have tended to emphasize structural features such as capital accumulation and the state. More recent accounts have been informed by structurated understandings of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. Thrift (1983: 29) has outlined the mutually constituted relationship between structure and agency:
[Social structures] are constituted by human practices, and yet at the same time they are the very medium of this constitution. Through the processes of socialisation, the extant physical environment, and so on, individuals draw upon social structure. But at each moment they do this they must also reconstitute that structure through the production or the reproduction of the conditions of production and reproduction. They therefore have the possibility as, in some sense, capable and knowing agents, of reconstituting or even transforming that structure.

In their examination of crisis, change and innovation in urban political decision-making, Healey et al. (1995: 14) propose a structurationist view:

This activity of structuration, the interrelation of structure and agency, is actively constructed through the material flow of resources and through the construction of ideas, images, values and norms. These values and norms then serve to filter how we understand and learn from the flow of experience of our lives. People are thus embedded in their social relations, both shaped by them and actively constituting them through the routines of daily life and through the deliberate strategies of relation-building.

For Stone and Whelan, their emphasis is on what they term ‘intermediate organizations’. These, and not macrostructures such as capitalism, should be the object of analysis in urban politics. It is in and through these intermediate structures — such as governing regimes — that actors go about doing urban politics.

This essay makes a very modest contribution to the future study of urban politics. Contributors raise a series of issues from their different disciplinary standpoints. Imbroscio argues that the field of urban politics is too important to be left to the discipline of mainstream and orthodox US political science. It is hard not to agree with him. Some possible ways forward are suggested by a number of contributors. And there are others, such as the philosophical literature on the political (Žižek, 1999), and its working into geographical scholarship (Dikec, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009). An interdisciplinary or, more heroically, a post-disciplinary urban politics is something to aspire to. Having different disciplines talk to one another, and write to one another, as in this essay, is but a beginning.

Perhaps Judge et al. (1995: 2) were right all along when they argued that a ‘book with the title *Theories of Urban Politics* should obviously be concerned with “theories” and “urban politics”’. However, where they were less right perhaps was on their understanding of what constitutes ‘urban politics’.

**Urban Politics as Sociospatial Struggles**

**DEBORAH MARTIN**

In considering the meaning and scope of the term ‘urban politics’, I find myself reflecting upon history and scholarly trajectories of urban geography. Over the last 30 years or so, concerns about political processes producing urban space have become an important focus within urban geography, particularly in response to Harvey’s (1973) call for ‘social justice and the city’ (e.g. Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Mitchell, 2003). In tracing ‘urban politics’ in contemporary geographical scholarship, I briefly outline the key traditions of urban geography informing the study of urban politics as sociospatial struggles.

At its core, urban politics characterizes some sort of struggle over space, or more specifically, over sociospatial processes. By describing urban politics as struggles over space, I highlight the inherent contestations and contradictions of geographical processes and settings. Yet for two-thirds of the twentieth century, urban geography did not explicitly address politics. Instead, geographers — and many other urban scholars — sought to understand the morphological patterns of cities, and the processes of mobility,
population, economic growth and land use that produced them (Park et al., 1925; Harris and Ullman, 1945; Borchert, 1967).

Tracing urban scholarship throughout the twentieth century, several themes emerge that inform contemporary urban political research in geography. These overlapping areas of investigation include: urban land values and the circulation of capital that produce urban space (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 1996; Wyly, 1999); social relations and social difference (Park et al., 1925; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Fincher and Jacobs, 1998); and state–society relations and activism (Castells, 1977; 1983; Martin and Miller, 2003; Elwood, 2006; Davidson, 2008). Urban land value, land use and social differentiation are core urban geographic concepts, although scholars vary in emphasizing these dynamics as either primarily outcomes of capital accumulation or more about multiple and at times irreconcilable understandings of land and sociospatial identities (Harvey, 1989; Fincher and Jacobs, 1998; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2008).

Within these themes in the urban geographical scholarship, the ontology of space or urban are not always clear. If urban politics is, as I have defined it, about struggles over space, what makes it urban? Louis Wirth (1938) characterized the urban (he used the term ‘city’) by density and heterogeneity of large numbers of people. Urban places are typified by densities of people, built environments, land uses and social interaction. Yet urban geographers today emphasize the urban as less a thing than a set of processes; as urbanization (Harvey, 1989; Soja, 2000). Politics is not a thing that occurs in a place that is urban; urban politics in contemporary geography may be understood as conjoined processes that interrelate and produce one another. So if urbanization is the product — but also the process — of secondary circuits of capital — that is, investments in property, built environment, types of production and reproduction, global economies and networks (Harvey, 1989) — then urban politics are the processes by which urbanization is negotiated and contested. Urbanization produces a regional and sometimes very local scale of experience, but it is not limited to that scale; it produces and is produced by global processes as well. It has a spatial expression and character, but is not bound or fixed spatially. Politics as a process that involves governments in conflicts, however, may have a distinct territoriality, interpolating government structures at multiple scales.

Urban geographers point to instances of absences of governments, both official and unofficial, as part of a neoliberal ideology of market-based logics that shape the terms as well as the foundations of struggles over space (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). While some early examinations of urban politics stressed the structural conditions of claims-making (Castells, 1977), much contemporary work engages the simultaneity of structure and agency (Purcell, 2008). The emphasis is no longer on resolving a tension between actors and structures, but on highlighting the inequalities that urbanization inherently produces; inequalities that are always geographical, structural and experiential. Conflicts over inequality can include very traditional politics of city elections, or conflicts over land use, or conflicts over how banks loan money and to whom. While urban geography has focused primarily on the global North in investigations of urban politics, scholars are beginning to point more forcefully towards offering a broad, fully global sense of urban politics in order to fully capture sociospatial struggles over inequality (Robinson, 2004). Urban politics most certainly needs to continue to engage global perspectives in this regard as research moves forward.

Urban politics for geographers, then, invokes a notion of the ‘urban’ as a set of processes that are always already global, but that have salience and expression in people’s daily lives at micro- and meso-scales. These urbanization processes produce and materially express struggles over space. Scholars of urban politics need to continue to examine how these struggles respond to and produce conditions that are local but also macro and global, interconnected and fully environmental and ecological. Urban geographers assume spatiality, but not fixity, to these processes of density, diversity and struggle. We seek to attend to the sorts of claims such struggles enact and enable;
struggles over space are more than political contestations, they are efforts to rework sociospace and produce places of experience, however temporary and in flux.

Urban Politics: The Case for a Polity Approach

CLARENCE STONE and ROBERT WHelan

On the surface, elections are the centerpieces of urban politics. In US cities candidate quests for votes reveal much about the politics of social identity, but such campaigns tell us little about how governing arrangements are put together. Consider how the study of city politics has evolved. The classic pluralism of Dahl’s *Who Governs?* (1961) claimed early prominence, but was dealt a punishing body blow by subsequent events of the 1960s. The *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (US Riot Commission, 1968) documented how far politics was from being the open and inclusive process claimed by pluralists. Then, in the 1970s, with deindustrialization and a financially constrained public sector in full view, the pluralist fiction of an autonomous, electorally centered politics received a knockout punch. Since that time, political economy has played a central role in the urban field. Many scholars embraced the idea that state and market had to achieve some kind of alignment, no matter how uneasy it might be. Negotiating that alignment occupied such a crucial place in the politics of cities that assumptions about the power of electorally controlled office-holding could not withstand close examination. With its focus on politics as the working out of multifaceted arrangements between market and the local state, political economy proved to be a compelling approach.

However, with the process of governance as our target, here we aim to move beyond political economy to a polity approach. It is an approach that brings society into the spotlight along with the state and economy. Phenomena such as race and ethnicity in particular occupy analytical space of their own, and they are assumed to be an integral part of how the overall order is woven together. They are not mere superstructure. With a polity approach the question becomes one of how we examine governance in a multilevel, multisector world. We propose to look through the lens of structure and agency. Because large structures such as race, capitalism and electoral democracy are familiar terms of analysis, it is tempting to rely on such simplifying abstractions, but simplification is ultimately the enemy of understanding. Because much of political life is conducted through intermediate rather than pure macrostructures, it is the intermediate bodies we propose to put forward as the focus for the analysis of urban politics.

When historical sociologist Philip Abrams (1982) talks about structuring, he is reminding us that change is ongoing, but at a level that rarely dislodges macrostructures. They are too embedded and wide-reaching. But political agents can form intermediate entities that combine facets of large structures in such a way as to alter the conditions of urban life. By creating new ways of operating — what Sewell (2005) terms schemas — agents can shift the exercise of power.¹

By intermediate structures, we mean something smaller than such macrostructures as the state, electoral democracy, capitalism or race, but something larger and more historically particular than social mechanisms. Intermediate structures are organizations and arrangements created by political agents to provide means for pursuing collective aims. They include broad entities such as political machines, governing coalitions and reform alliances, but also narrower entities such as financial control boards, public–private partnerships and community-based organizations. An intermediate organization

¹ By schemas, Sewell (2005) means ways of doing things (akin to rules or social mechanisms), and structures consist of schemas and resources combined.
may be formally organized, such as a city’s redevelopment agency, or an informal network, such as the biracial coalition through which Atlanta is governed. Intermediate is a sufficiently flexible term to include a specific organization such as Atlanta’s Action Forum (a means for bringing black and white leaders together for off-the-record conversation), and also the informal biracial coalition in which it is embedded. Precise scope is not the point; construction by political agents is.

In a city’s politics, macrostructures are not the players; rather they are contextual forces that political agents take into account as they construct and modify the entities through which the governance and politics of the city are carried on. Thus, intermediate structures are entities through which political agents blend macro-forces, and around which nuances are introduced. Consider the workings of business influence in Atlanta after the city’s electoral balance shifted from white to black and the city’s first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, assumed office. As an aggressive wielder of executive power, Jackson sought to press Atlanta’s white corporate structure into changing long-established patterns by hiring black employees at senior level, and insisted that city contracting procedures should include black companies.

Atlanta’s business leaders saw their long-favored position under attack. Initially they implicitly threatened to withhold investment in the city (playing a macrostructural card), but they soon backed off because they realized that they themselves could be harmed by an inharmonious political–business climate. The next move was to recalibrate black–white relations, particularly through embracing a change in the city’s contracting practices but also more generally through integrating African Americans into Atlanta’s business and civic life. For his part, Mayor Jackson established a series of ‘pound cake summit meetings’ through which black–white consultation could occur.

This scenario illustrates the intermingling of macro-forces. Atlanta’s business leaders quickly realized that control of investment was not a sufficient foundation for the level of influence they wanted. They made concessions, but also activated the extensive network of relations they had built with black business and professional leaders over the years of the biracial coalition. For his part, Mayor Jackson realized that, strong black identity notwithstanding, he was not the sole voice of black interests. The macrostructural context of capitalism, electoral democracy and race played out in a complex way within Atlanta’s biracial coalition, with civil society connections providing an important dimension as well. Internal business unity, a close alliance between business and the newspapers, a tradition of black electoral solidarity, the powers of a strong mayor, a civic business network within the black community long accustomed to pursuing middle-class opportunities and negotiating with white leaders, and a web of cross-racial ties provide a set of actors not adequately characterized as agents of a single macrostructure. The mix of players and their modes of interaction are best captured by giving attention to intermediate structures, though it is essential to keep the macrostructural context in mind. Atlanta’s politics involves much more than playing out the imperatives of a capitalist system or even the interaction of a capitalist economy with electoral democracy.

Other cities show significant variations. School desegregation differed from economic development, and its examination reinforced the importance of local civic arrangements (Crain, 1968). A flood of historical studies have shown that American cities are racially as well as economically embedded. In addition, partly because of race, the development of the American welfare state has followed a path different from the European pattern. Local–national relations in the US provide much wider scope for local influences than European scholars are accustomed to seeing. As noted by one historian, the ‘fates of the New Deal and the Great Society were to a great extent determined by local public officials and their constituents’ (Sugrue, 2003: 302). The point is not that cities somehow function independently of external factors, but that translocal forces are mediated

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2 As a reference point, see Hunter (1953).
through local actors in ways that are far from trivial. As a way of seeing politics as historically constituted, intermediate structures serve as key foci of observation. A polity approach gives due recognition to race and civil society, and avoids unduly restricting the range of forces at work.

**Beyond Formal Politics of Planning**  
FARANAK MIRAFTAB

Contributing to this cross-disciplinary conversation on urban politics from the perspective of planning is problematic, because of the discrepancy between how planning imagines or represents itself and its actual practice in history. As a field of practice rather than a unified discipline with a clear intellectual tradition marked by a singular body of work, planning scholarship in its theoretical, methodological and epistemological constructs is informed by multidisciplinary intellectual traditions. Planning aligns with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of a field: an agglomeration of closely interacting and mutually reconstituting practices, discourses, organizations and actors. How planning scholars represent the field relies not only on their disciplinary and intellectual positions, but also on larger societal forces and processes within which planning as a profession is practiced. The central disconnection lies between imagined and practiced planning, and how the field perceives its relation with politics in general and urban politics in particular. In other words, planning practitioners and scholars alike often choose to project planning as a benevolent, value-neutral field of practice with the goal of improving public good and wellbeing. This innocent image of planning contradicts the wretched record of planners as facilitators of state agendas for social control and of planning decisions that systematically displace disadvantaged populations through zoning and urban renewal projects to create exclusionary cities. Whether to achieve colonization, development, modernization or neoliberalization, the state relies on the technical and discursive skills of planners. Yet, despite its deep colonial roots and its legitimacy by the modernist state to facilitate nation-building, much of planning discourse claims political detachment, seeing planning as an activity that concerns problem-solving not problem-framing (McLoughlin, 1969; Faludi, 1973).

By the late twentieth century, however, a century-long record of planning practice and changing relationships between the state, citizens and private sector increasingly bruised the profession’s self-ascribed narrative of political innocence. These processes have brought both urban politics and informal politics to the center stage of planning practice and scholarship. Two crises in particular played key roles: the 1960s crisis of state legitimacy and the 1980s crisis of capital accumulation. In the 1960s, social movements questioned the ability of a liberal democratic state and its representative democracy to stand for the interests of its minorities and underprivileged citizens, and called for inclusion and participation of citizens in state planning decisions (see e.g. Davidoff, 1965; Krumholz, 1994). In the 1980s, the crisis of capital accumulation and diminishing resources of the state undermined the efficiency of the central government to address citizens’ needs and called for greater participation of non-state actors in the provision of basic social and urban services (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). The crisis of accumulation led to what urban geographer David Harvey and others call the

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In a recent issue of *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Beard and Basolo (2009) steer a lively debate in their commentary by arguing that planning is coming of age and is an emerging discipline. In the same issue, responses by Milroy (2009) and Myers (2009) respectively challenge the suggested disciplinary standing of planning, which — they argue — is best understood as a field of practice.
‘privatization of everything’, including the state, and redefined the state’s role with an emphasis on entrepreneurship (see Miraftab et al., 2008). For example, in providing basic urban services, such as water, sanitation and shelter, the state’s responsibility shifts from provision to management of these services. In other words, the government no longer provides needed urban services directly but facilitates through planners as mediators, ‘enabling’ environments for non-state actors to provide such services instead.

These processes of the late twentieth century rescaled the realms of planning intervention from national to global and local. In the constellation of the state, citizens and private sector for urban development decisions, the national government is no longer the center. Such shifts have had important implications for planning enterprise and for understanding urban politics in both planning practice and scholarship. The emerging new forms of governance we know today as neoliberal broadened the range of planners’ employers, including private and non-profit sector organizations and agencies (Douglass and Friedmann, 1998). Perhaps more importantly, in the absence of state resources to fuel professional planning practices, planning scholars and practitioners have also come to recognize a range of actors’ everyday spatial practices that shape the city through formal and informal politics. This recognition has helped to expand the definition of planning practice to include informal practices of urban dwellers and poor citizens, and recognize the role of citizens in constructing their neighborhoods, cities and livelihoods.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, therefore, actors who had not earlier appeared on the radar of planning practitioners and scholars have gained increasing attention and legitimacy as important players in urban governance, and hence in both planning practice and scholarship.

Such decentering processes in planning generated an emphasis on cities and neighborhoods (downward shift) and a greater inclusion of informal actors through community activism (outward shift). In contrast to modern planning’s emphasis on national politics, a neoliberal mode of governance advocates state decentralization. Here municipalities and community-based organizations (CBOs) play a greater role in setting local development agendas. With national governments taking less responsibility for social wellbeing, the city and neighborhood have become the main arenas for citizenship contestation (Purcell, 2003). Planning decisions by local municipal governments and CBOs have contributed to a downward shift from a national political arena to a more local one in cities and neighborhoods, thus demystifying the political nature of planning decisions.

This downward shift in the realms of politics and planning action also expands the limited, formal definition of urban politics to one that takes the informal politics of community activism seriously: an outward shift in recognition of non-professional actors in planning as a field. From an elitist, exclusive practice by professionals and trained practitioners, planning has increasingly broadened into a more inclusive field that recognizes the key role citizens and grassroots activists play in shaping their cities and communities (Miraftab, forthcoming).

The structural shifts above demystify planning practice and contribute to exposing the informal urban politics involved in official arenas of policymaking. The debates on the informality of urban politics have also helped to reveal informal processes through which professional planners and city officials cut deals and make decisions — namely the interest-vested processes that have always been at the center of planning practice but have been obscured by the profession’s representation of itself as formal, impartial and apolitical. By focusing on processes of informality from above, scholarship on urban informality (looking especially at official planning processes in the global South) has been particularly illuminating. In her four propositions on informality, Roy (2009) for example draws on several planning decisions in India (land-use planning and deployment of eminent domain among others) to articulate how the state itself is an informal planning entity. In the same vein, Miraftab (2004) — reflecting on municipal government strategies for waste collection in Cape Town — reveals how the local state...
itself is involved in the informalization and the casualization of labor. While community activism as an arena of informal urban politics has captured the imagination of the new generation of planning practitioners, the informal urban politics of the top bureaucratic structures of planning have also been increasingly exposed in debates on urban politics and planning.

Overall, because planning is a field of action with multiple (often contesting) actors and interests, urban politics holds neither a unitary nor a stable position within the discipline. The last three decades have witnessed significant changes in how urban politics relates intellectually and practically to the field of urban planning. The definition of urban politics has expanded beyond the limited formal politics of city halls, mayors’ offices and legislative councils to include informal politics through community activists, policymakers and planners. The earlier discourses of expertise and scientific detachment increasingly fall short in obscuring the profession’s political embeddedness, both from above and below and through formal and informal processes. In the twenty-first century, planning is an old emperor with no clothes.

Urban Politics beyond the Urban

ALLAN COCHRANE

At first sight, defining urban politics may seem straightforward — surely we all know what it means. Presumably it’s just the politics of what goes on in cities or city neighborhoods. In practice, however, attempting to define it as an object of study is by no means as straightforward as its easy use in everyday language — or academic writing — might suggest. As soon as one begins to pick away at it, the whole notion just seems to unravel.

There is certainly a strong tradition, not only in urban studies and geography, but also within political science, that starts with the setting of the city or the urban. From this perspective urban politics is understood to be the politics of, or the political relations within, places that are cities or urban agglomerations. Such a politics is seen to be the product of an explicitly urban experience, reflecting the hierarchies and networks of power relations that emerge from it. This tradition has produced some important and thoughtful work (reflected, for example, in Robert Dahl’s analysis of pluralism; David Harvey’s discussion of the shift from managerialist to entrepreneurial governance; the work of Kevin Cox and others on the local politics of territoriality; the identification of the urban growth machine by Harvey Molotch and John Logan; and the exploration of urban regimes by Clarence Stone and a host of followers).

However, finding ways of precisely defining the delimited space (or territory) of the ‘city’ within which urban politics takes place is itself problematic — where does the ‘urban’ end and some other political space begin? And how might one characterize that other political space?

At its simplest, of course, it might be possible to follow a similar line to that used to define the urban, so that the non-urban becomes the space outside the boundaries that define the city (perhaps, then, the ‘suburban’ or even the ‘rural’). The problem here is that it is increasingly clear that such preconceived boundary divisions make little sense, either in terms of social or political relations. Jennifer Robinson’s work (see e.g. Robinson, 2005; see also Simone, 2005) has emphasized the difficulty of separating peasant from urban society in the cities of the global South, while others have argued that it is precisely the move away from traditional urban forms organized around some central city that defines the contemporary urban condition (see e.g. Dear, 2001).

Approaches drawn from various forms of neo-Marxism seemed to offer hope for a while, precisely because of their promise to escape from narrow spatial fetishism. So, Manuel Castells’ notion of collective consumption identified the urban with a particular aspect of capitalist reproduction and of the public policy associated with...
it. The politics of collective consumption was identified with the rise of urban social movements. And Lefebvre’s emphasis on urbanization as a process, with the emergence of an urban society, raised the possibility of urban politics as the politics of that society (potentially focused on ‘the right to the city’). However, the former somehow managed to ignore some of the key aspects of urban politics, which focused on economic development (picked up by the theorists of urban growth coalitions and regimes), and the hoped-for urban social movement stubbornly failed to materialize. Meanwhile the latter effectively implies that all politics is now ‘urban’. Unfortunately this leaves us with no truly convincing non-urban realm, which may not be a problem for Lefebvre but is for those seeking to identify any distinctive sphere of ‘urban’ politics.

From a relatively straightforward set of understandings, in other words, it now looks as if all our attempts at understanding leave us in a sort of theoretical cul-de-sac. Maybe it would be better just to go back to developing a series of more or less sophisticated case studies.

However, it seems to me that there remain exciting possibilities which deserve to be explored.4 The first remains rooted in the lived experiences of the urban, but in ways that reflect what Doreen Massey (2005) has called the ‘throwntogetherness of place’, pointing to the more mundane ways in which urban social existence is put together and highlighting the extent to which cities continue to be the sites where a range of different political outcomes may be explored and struggled over. From this perspective the territorial boundaries are of less significance than the sets of relations which help to construct those experiences so that, for example, in his discussion of ‘prosaic sites of multiculture’, Ash Amin (2002: 959) is able to identify a micropolitics where ‘much of the negotiation of difference occurs at the very local level through everyday experiences and encounters’. The urban is understood as the space within which sets of relationships overlap, settle and come together, with a particular intensity.

If this is one way into a non-territorial but still fundamentally ‘placed’ urban politics, a second relates to the recognition that urban politics needs to be understood as assembled, in ways that reflect the extent to which places are the product of relations which stretch across space, far beyond the administrative (or other) boundaries that help to define them. This implies that urban politics — in particular places — will also reflect interests and conflicts apparently drawn from elsewhere, while even the most apparently local of political actors may actively reach out to draw in policy lessons and political understandings developed in quite separate contexts. From this standpoint, in other words, the urban and urban politics are assembled and put together in place, yet are shaped by the nature of their connections to elsewhere rather than being limited by the territorial boundaries of particular urban spaces. This is an active and continuing process of learning, borrowing and misinterpretation (often, but not only, enabled by networks of consultants) which encourages the co-production of urban and global public policy and politics, making up and giving material form to actually existing neoliberalisms, their discontents and resistances (see e.g. Porter and Shaw, 2008; McCann and Ward, 2011).

In a sense, this is a case for a politics of the urban beyond the urban, which is nevertheless predicated on recognition of the importance of the specificity of the (local, global, regional, national) entanglements that define particular cities. It does not replace, but rather runs alongside, not only territorial understandings (which continue to provide an important focus for political mobilization) but also, and equally importantly, those which focus on the overlapping administrative hierarchies of government and state.

4 The arguments that follow draw directly on work I have been undertaking with John Allen (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; 2010).
Urban Politics as a Politics of Comparison

KEVIN WARD

Over a decade ago Cochrane (1999: 123) stated that:

The urban politics of the twenty-first century will be both a local politics and a global politics: the challenge to be faced by those seeking to analyze it effectively will be to hold both aspects together at the same time, without allowing either to dominate as a matter of principle.

This proved to be a highly prescient argument, probably even more so than Cochrane could have known. Sidestepping still important disciplinary and theoretical differences, the last decade has seen an intellectual consensus — of sorts — emerge on the importance of understanding and analyzing urban politics in its wider territorial context. This has built on different disciplines’ foundational contributions to the study of urban politics. Whether Castells (sociology), Dahl (political science) or Harvey (geography), these earlier intellectual endeavors have been influential. For example, in human geography, conceiving of urban politics as being about the struggle over sociospatial processes (Martin, this essay) remains central.

Nevertheless, across the social sciences it is now commonplace to read how the global is in the urban or how the urban is in the global. Different disciplines have described it in different ways. They have drawn on different theoretical traditions. In my own discipline, human geographers have generated a series of theoretical insights into how best to theorize geographical scale, particularly as it relates to the changing spatiality of the state (Jones, 1997). Taking its intellectual leave from debates over the qualitative restructuring of the nation state, this work has emphasized the place of the urban political decision-making system vis-à-vis other geographical scales (Jessop, 1997). In addition, ‘politics’ has been increasingly understood as more than being about government; it is about struggles over the governance of territory, which is about small and big ‘P’ politics. In political science, the multi-level governance (MLG) theoretical framework has emerged as a means of capturing how urban politics is shaped by agreements, frameworks and guidelines located at other geographical scales (most notably at the EU level) (John, 2009). It has retained the emphasis on government as the site of politics with a capital ‘P’, and on the formal political sphere. While there have been some intellectual concessions in using terms such as ‘governance’, much of mainstream political science remains wedded to understandings of electoral power, and the workings of government. Despite these disciplinary differences, an across-the-board acceptance of the role something called ‘the global’ plays on something called ‘the urban’ — à la new urban politics (NUP) (Cox, 1995) — together with a more begrudging acknowledgment that something called ‘the urban’ shapes something called ‘the global’ (DeFilippis, 1999), has characterized much of this more recent work.

Where there has been less agreement is over how best to ‘hold’, in Cochrane’s words, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ together. This has proved an altogether more thorny issue, not least because it speaks to a wider concern in the social sciences. This has involved rethinking what is meant by ‘the urban’. For the interdisciplinary endeavor calling itself ‘urban politics’ this would seem to ask fairly fundamental questions of it. Saying that ‘it is not possible to separate out neatly the local from national or even international politics as each one affects the other’ (John, 2009: 17) — a sentiment stated numerous times by many scholars over the last decade — only gets this line of inquiry so far.

More abstractly, Cox’s (1993; 1995; 1998) work in human geography on territory and politics remains hugely influential. His position on this matter is reflected in his assertion that ‘what is commonly referred to as ‘urban politics’ is typically quite heterogeneous and by no means referable to struggles within, or among, the agents structured by some set of social relations corresponding ambiguously to the urban (Cox, 2001: 756). While
being suggestive of more fruitful lines of analysis, this approach still raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps a reframing of the question might help? Maybe to hold the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ together involves a rethinking of ‘where’ goes into the making up, or assembling, of ‘urban politics’?

As Cochrane (this essay) and others have argued, there are elements of elsewhere that go into the assembling of ‘urban politics’. Comparison, making references to other places, would seem to be a central component of contemporary ‘urban politics’ (and evidence suggests some past precedents; see Healey and Upton, 2010). In my own city, the urban politics of Manchester has been shaped by comparisons to other cities both in terms of places to emulate (Baltimore, Barcelona) and places from which to differ (Liverpool, Sheffield). In the former, this has involved visits and exchanges, in and through which a process of education and learning has occurred. The sociospatial struggles within localities over particular economic development pathways and trajectories are ones in which comparisons are made and remade to other localities. In Manchester, those pushing a more critical and alternative vision for the city have also made counter-comparisons (Amsterdam, Portland). A politics of comparison has been omnipresent in the urban politics around the city’s future. This example highlights the circuits, channels, networks and webs that connect different localities, and in and through which cities — ‘as local alliances attempting to create and realize new powers to intervene in processes of geographical restructuring’ (Cox and Mair, 1991: 208) — do urban politics.

All of which would seem to mean two things conceptually: first, the nature of the social relations between localities warrant further study. Which agents are involved in the movement — borrowing, evaluation, learning, etc. — of policies from one place to another, and how are the processes of comparison and learning performed? Second, the material and territorial outcomes in one place matter to what happens in another place. Localities are implicated in each other’s pasts, presents and futures in a way that challenges more traditional ways of conceiving of ‘urban politics’. So, the territorial and the relational are intertwined in the urban politics of both here (e.g. Manchester) and there (e.g. Barcelona). In the process the where of ‘here’ and of ‘there’ is disturbed. Rising to these challenges — theoretically and methodologically — should be part of any future interdisciplinary intellectual project on ‘urban politics’.

The Failings of Political Science and the Need for a Post-disciplinary Urban Politics

DAVID IMBROSCIO

The interdisciplinary dialogue presented in this essay strongly suggests the pressing need for a sharply post-disciplinary approach to the study of urban politics. There are, of course, many factors driving this pressing need. But in the American context one especially salient source lies in the intellectual failings of the mainstream of the discipline of political science. This discipline, dedicated as it is to the study of politics, ought to be a (perhaps the) natural home for political study on the urban scale. Indeed, many prominent scholars have of late characterized urban political analysis as imperiled by its drift away from mainstream political science (see Sapotichne et al., 2007). The reality, however, is much to the contrary. The momentous failings of the discipline of political science, three of which I will highlight here, make it a highly problematic underpinning for the study of urban politics. The search for a genuinely post-disciplinary urban politics is therefore very much in order.

A first failing of mainstream political science, perhaps its most significant, lies in its flawed understanding of the central concept in the study of politics — power. Specifically, the mainstream of the discipline continues to embrace pluralism as its
dominant theory of power. Such an embrace continues despite pluralism’s exposure as empirically implausible as early as the 1960s, something later reinforced by the apostasies of its early (and truculent) defenders (see Dahl, 1982; Lindblom, 1982). Although the critique of pluralism is multifaceted, pluralism’s chief deficiency is its conceptualization of economy and polity as ‘separable realms . . . [where] the state and the market have their own dynamics’ (Elkin, 1982: 54). Only half of the power equation is examined in pluralist analysis and, as such, political outcomes are ultimately seen as wholly contingent rather than powerfully shaped by structural forces rooted in economic relations. While much of the urban subfield within American political science has valiantly resisted the embrace of pluralism (see Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989), pluralist tendencies rooted in the mainstream discipline still creep into it (see Davies and Imbroscio, 2009c).

A second major shortcoming of mainstream political science stems from its methodological domination by two hegemonic and highly problematic approaches to the conduct of inquiry — behavioralism and rational choice theory. Like pluralism, the problems afflicting behavioralism have also been widely recognized since the 1960s. This recognition spurred a subsequent movement in the 1970s towards a post-behavioralism, but this emendation offered more continuity than real change (Farr, 1995), leaving even post-behavioralism open to a variety of devastating epistemic and methodological critiques (see e.g. Dryzek, 1988). Rational choice, the more recent darling of mainstream political science, has also been thoroughly critiqued as ‘pathological’, a critique sustained against an onslaught of defenses (see Green and Shapiro, 2005). Once again, much of the urban subfield within American political science has resisted the hegemony of these problematic approaches, but at the cost of being relegated to perpetual backwater status within the discipline.

Mainstream political science is flawed in a third major way: it is thoroughly infected with ideological bias. This flaw, intimately linked with the first two, causes the discipline of political science to adopt a celebratory rather than critical perspective towards the status quo. Most significant here is the discipline’s implicit normative endorsement of a particular type of political system, i.e. the limited liberal, or ‘thin’, democracy (Barber, 1984) that exists in the United States (Imbroscio, 2010). In short, just as mainstream (neoclassical) economics provides an elaborate normative justification for (and celebration of) a certain type of economic system (a market, with mostly private property and selective government intervention), mainstream political science justifies and celebrates a certain type of political system (the ‘thin’ democracy of the American status quo). Such ideological bias distorts mainstream political science’s analysis of politics, causing its empirical understanding of political dynamics to be deeply defective.

Taken together, failings such as these lead one to conclude that the analysis of politics — including urban politics — is much too important to be left to the discipline of (American) political science (much the same can no doubt be said of the analysis of economics and neoclassicism). Of course, the ultimate implication of this critique points to the need to fashion a new science of politics, at all scales. But scholars studying politics on the urban scale need not wait for the broader discipline called political science to shift — something that, as Dryzek (2006: 487) points out, ‘has proven very hard’ over the last half century. Despite that discipline’s name and its implied claim of authority over political subject matter, and in opposition to some recent vociferous urgings (Sapotichne et al., 2007), scholars of urban politics should cease taking cues from mainstream political science — cues that only serve to debilitate analytic and explanatory capacities. Instead, they should begin to fashion a genuinely post-disciplinary approach to the study of urban politics, drawing in considerable measure upon the recent and insightful urban work done by geographers, sociologists and planners, as well as heterodox political scientists. Such a post-disciplinary approach potentially holds great appeal not only to urban-focused political scientists; those urbanists rooted in cognate fields might welcome the
opportunity to cast off some unwanted intellectual baggage of their home disciplines as well.

The central remaining question involves the content of this post-disciplinary approach. Developing and explicating that content, including an engagement with the complex issues surrounding questions of ontology and epistemology, defines much of our task ahead. It is hoped that this colloquium will provide one salutary step forward.5

Conclusion
KEVIN WARD and DAVID IMBROSCIO

This essay has brought together those working on the issue of ‘urban politics’ from across a number of disciplines, so it has been interdisciplinary by design. In the introduction we set out some commonalities, three issues present in at least two contributions, over which there appeared to be some intellectual common ground. In this short conclusion, we emphasize the differences that characterize this set of contributions, highlighting three areas of future research we see as potentially fruitful.

First, it appears that those working in the different disciplines represented here have different understandings of the ‘urban’. This is an ontological difference. In some disciplines the urban is taken for granted, a self-given territory. It is the backdrop to wider social processes. In others it is something that is produced through contestation and struggle. These disciplines understand ‘the urban’ as constituted in and though relationships of different geographical reach that are given a territorial expression. Underpinning these differences is a more profound set of conversations currently occurring over spatial theorization, which includes not only the disciplines represented here but others such as social theory (Fariñas and Bender, 2009). It seems to us that future work on urban politics might not only learn from these more philosophical debates but also contribute to them.

Second, there are clear differences amongst the disciplines represented in this essay as to how politics is conceived and understood. In some cases politics is largely the thing of governments. Politics is about election, political parties and what happens amongst them. In many ways this might reflect the global North origins of much of urban political theory. In other disciplines the emphasis is on the informal political sphere. What characterizes much of the work in both these fields is that politics is understood as being about conflict, negotiation and resolution. Pushing this further, there might seem to be some intellectual mileage in drawing upon the philosophical work on ‘the political’, ‘the post-political’ and ‘the post-democratic’ condition. This understands contemporary politics as stripped of its fundamental political elements. In their place have emerged a range of processes and technologies geared towards better, more efficient, management (Žižek, 1999). How traditional ways of conceiving of urban politics respond to the challenges thrown up by these more philosophical approaches is something that will shape the future of the subfield.

Third, we began this essay with reference to the first edition of Theories of Urban Politics, in which were chapters organized according to theoretical traditions, such as Marxism and pluralism. While this organizing principle was less pronounced in the book’s second edition, it was nevertheless there in the background. This collection of contributions does not map neatly onto different major social science theories. Nor necessarily should it. Elitism, institutionalism, Marxism and pluralism are each present

5 For another attempted step forward (one which engages with the relevant ontological and epistemic issues), see Davies and Imbroscio (2010), especially chapters by Boudreau, Davies, Magnusson, Sidney and Wyly.
to a greater or lesser extent in the disciplines represented here, together with others such as postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. What work on urban politics can do in the future is ensure it makes a contribution to wider discussions over social scientific theory building.

A central question remaining is whether future scholarship that works through these three differences (and others), as well as the areas of research they engender, can culminate in the development of a truly post-disciplinary study of urban politics. As set out in our introduction, we believe such a development would be a heroic achievement, and hence not one easily realized. Nonetheless, we believe it is very much a worthy intellectual inspiration. It is our hope that, by starting a conversation across different disciplines, this essay will serve as a useful beginning.

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