Two Cheers for American Cities:
Commentary on *Urban Politics and American Democracy*, ed. Amy Bridges and Michael Javen Fortner

Jennifer L. Hochschild
7/24/2012 10:43 AM
DRAFT

The editors of *Urban Politics and American Democracy* (hereafter, *UPAD*), identify three provocative themes running through the volume: 1) "urban autonomy is contingent upon the historical development of the American polity;" 2) "when urban actors and public policies are relatively autonomous they can exert a significant effect on American society and politics," and 3) "local politics and policies shape an individual or a group's . . . membership in a broader community, whether defined as political or racial" (all p. 1 of prospectus).   Empirically, the book is full of feedback loops, ranging from the very macro interaction between constitutional federalism and local policy debates through intermediate levels to the very micro question of the associations among parents' involvement in different public arenas. Normatively, the authors' touchstone for successful urban citizenship is strong democratic control and greater racial or ethnic equality.

In this commentary, I will react to individual chapters and, more importantly, these overarching themes. They are significant, innovative, and analytically rich. My own views do not always concur with those of the authors and editors, but they have been deeply informed by their arguments.

Autonomy and feedback loops initially (and perhaps also on closer look) seem to be antithetical. Autonomy implies independence and even separation: cities are not legally or economically dependent creatures of the state or federal government, but rather make policy choices and deploy resources as they wish. Feedback loops imply interdependence and connection: cities are shaped by the state or federal government, such that their policy choices and resource deployment are constrained, and they in turn shape other important features of American politics.

One can ease the antithesis with a sleight of hand – at some historical moments cities are independent and at other historical moments they are interdependent or merely dependent. That is surely true, but not analytically very interesting unless one goes much farther to explain how, when, and why the swings between autonomy and feedback occur. Some chapters in *UPAD* start to do just that. Richard Harris and Alex Kremstein elegantly show how small deindustrialized cities lost whatever governmental control they used to have over development, at least in conjunction with real estate interests, and are now almost wholly the creatures of benevolent dictatorships in the form of foundations, hospitals, and universities. Although Fortner rather than Harris and Kremstein uses Tocqueville as a touchstone, their chapter bidding "farewell to the urban growth machine" reminded me vividly of Tocqueville's famous passage decrying "the sort of despotism that democratic nations have to fear:"

> I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal. . . . Over this kind of men stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment

and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. . . . It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be sole agent and judge thereof. . . . Thus it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties (de Toc. Mayer ed., p. 667).

This characterization seems a bit harsh as a description of nonprofit organizations seeking to curb childhood obesity, community violence, and urban blight in a desperately poor and feckless city. Nevertheless, Harris and Kremstein fear that through the community development regime, urban residents have irrevocably lost the capacity to control the direction of their city, whether through electoral politics or direct participation. That the loss is due to transformation of the urban economy rather than intentional racial or class domination does not make it any less poignant. It does make it an example of the first and third themes of *UPAD*.

Tom Hulme, in contrast, provides an illustration of urban autonomy, or at least of claims to urban autonomy. He focuses on a historical period almost a century earlier than that of Harris and Kremstein, during which American cities were becoming increasingly industrialized, populated, and substantively energetic. I draw no causal inference about the relationship between economic conditions and urban autonomy from these two cases; the empirical materials and analytic purposes of the chapters are too disparate for direct comparison. But Hulme does offer the existence proof that, on occasion, "citizenship was an identity discourse strongly tied to a notion of the city and . . . 'community civics'." (p. 1, ch. 2). Hulme's cities, like Harris and Kremstein's, were deeply engaged in managing "the health of the citizen" through "certain types of behavior and responsibility" and "egalitarian social service provision." But the earlier urban optimism, even boosterism, contrasts sharply with the current urban despair and hollowing out. The former claimed and promoted a city's right and capacity to benefit its citizens; the latter abandons, perhaps even with gratitude, any claim to self-control or to righting the wrongs of its residents.[1]

Hulme is, of course, analyzing textbooks' presentations of urban politics rather than actual urban political activity, so as he notes one must take the Progressive city's self-image with a large pinch of salt. Nevertheless, the self-image is revealing, especially in comparison with Harris and Kremstein's urban growth regime or community development regime. "Citizens were envisioned as interlocking parts of local communities," (p. 1), cities engaged in " 'aggressive governmental expansion'" (p. 2 quoting D Amsterdam), and "governmental techniques and functions" could and did promote "advanced civilization" (p. 13-14). Governmental action was the solution to the evils of private enterprise.   In Hulme's words, "the situation before municipal ownership was presented as negative, with private companies delivering little water, opposed to the municipal egalitarian's goal of 'millions of streams for every emergency'." (p. 21). In the textbooks' words, " 'no privileges should be given to

---

[1] Harris and Kremstein note that "local government. . . was excluded from the core planning team and direct implementation [of the program to reduce childhood obesity] not because it lacked motivation or concern, but because it lacked capacity; indeed the Mayor was deeply and personally supportive of the effort"(p. 28, ch. 4).

corporations which would cause discomfort to, or increase the danger of, the people' " (p. 15-16). Urban autonomy, indeed!

Although Hulme does not discuss *UPAD*'s third theme, he makes it clear that even the most Panglossian textbooks did not venture to depict a racial and ethnic utopia. Nevertheless, they consistently used phrases such as "the people of the city" (p. 14) or "community life" (p. 15) or "people's bodies and minds" (p. 16) – suggesting implicitly that regimes of state-imposed segregation or group hierarchy were not part of the autonomous thriving city. Or perhaps it never occurred to textbook writers that anything other than state-imposed segregation or group hierarchy could characterize a city so that when they wrote about "the people of the city" they did not really mean *all* of the people. On this point, we would benefit from further investigation by Hulme.

In short, while Hulme fills out the contours of the first theme of *UPAD*, he is silent on part of the third and his argument seems to run counter to the second. That is, Hulme's cities as presented in textbooks respond to rather than "exert a significant effect on" American society and politics. As he puts it, "while perhaps in retreat on the national stage, progressivism in the local arena was very much alive." (p. 2). Similarly, "while 'Americanization as a social movement and public policy faded from public consciousness' after immigration restriction in the 1920s, the formative ideas. . . remained deeply embedded in the discourse of citizenship [in cities] throughout the interwar years" (p. 3, quoting Ziegler-McPherson). That is, the influence ran from national political discourse to urban self-presentation, not the reverse. In that, Hulme resembles Harris and Kremstein, who also see cities as more influenced than influencing.

While Hulme implicitly disagrees with the second theme of *UPAD*'s editors, Lisa Miller actively contests it, at least for the contemporary era. In her view, modern cities are unable even to exercise local autonomy, never mind to exert a significant effect on American society and politics. The fault lies in James Madison's constitutional design and the long dark shadow of the United States' origins as a slave society.   Miller links the argument that American cities are stymied in their efforts at independent action with acute concerns about the third theme, political and racial inequality. Like the editors, she is very attentive to feedback loops, in her case through three links: cities' and local actors' power or powerlessness, the federal government's ability or inability to act on behalf of blacks' rights, and the promotion or retardation of racial justice. As these variations suggest, she sees the feedback loops operating in several directions at different points in American history, as the contest between local and national power centers develops.

Miller is as discouraged about contemporary politics as are Harris and Kremstein, though for different reasons. In her words:

> The current configuration of the multi-tiered structure of American federalism distorts political priorities and contributes to a governing system that provides punishment, rather than prosperity for. . . urban minorities. It does so by diluting the power of urban citizens in the vertical structures of governance, and by Balkanizing natural urban allies across the array of horizontal jurisdictional authorities.

It was not always thus. After the Civil War, "white segregationists successfully exploited their state and local police powers to deny legal protection to blacks. . . – and often won the battle to block the increasingly powerful center from making law in support of black rights and interests" (p. 5). That is, postbellum local governments were indeed autonomous and did exert a

significant effect on American society and politics, but in the service of racial hierarchy and injustice. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the balance of power shifted in a more positive direction: "racial reformers began to find success in nationalizing racial issues to shield African-Americans from repressive, local, white majorities;" (p. 5). That is, post-World War II local governments lost autonomy and their effect on American society and politics declined, to the benefit of racial justice.

But the contest has shifted again. By the twenty-first century, not only has "the national agenda on cities virtually disappeared," but also "city dwellers" have been unable to mount an "effective and sustained campaign to reduce income inequality and urban poverty" (p. 7). That is, both the national and local governments lost, if not their their autonomy then at least their will or capacity to promote racial and economic justice. At present, whether intentionally or not, the federal government, states, and localities are all "erecting obstacles to collective action on issues of security, prosperity, and punishment" (p. 10).

I find Miller's argument intriguing but not fully persuasive. After all, her core causal structure -- the constitutional system of federalism -- has persisted more or less intact through all three of her crucial eras: the segregationist postbellum period, the almost revolutionary civil rights era, and the recent decades of conservative retrenchment and local contestation. In some eras and some locations, local activists have battled higher levels of government in the interests of racial and class justice, as her case of mobilizing against gun violence shows. But in other eras and other locations, local activists have battled higher levels of government in the interests of segregation and exploitation of the poor and of minorities, as her case of post- Civil War segregation shows.

 Thus in my view, the constitutional location of cities within the complicated American federal structure is an empty vessel. Local political systems are waiting to be filled with morally abhorrent sheriffs like Bull Connor or Joseph Arpaio or with morally admirable activists such as Miller's Mothers in Charge or Men United for a Better Philadelphia. Moving politics up to the national level harms the chances of racial justice in some eras: President Woodrow Wilson fostered urban segregation, and for decades Congress and the courts implicitly sanctioned lynching and state Jim Crow laws. Moving politics up to the national level promotes racial justice in other eras: President Lyndon Johnson and the Congresses and courts of the mid-1960s promulgated policies to fight urban racial injustice. And moving politics up to the national level may have no impact: Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, and their respective Congresses, did their best to ignore cities altogether.

The frustrating lesson of American history is that urban autonomy and racial equality are not linked in any clear causal way; the motives and capacities of political actors, who must strive within the contours of particular social and economic contexts, determine whether local governance reinforces or contests injustice. Similarly, which direction the feedback loop spins -- whether higher-level governments influence the city or vice versa -- is indeterminate, or at least we do not yet have a clear and persuasive theory about which trajectory occurs when.

Those points bring me to the two remaining chapters. These are, respectively, the most micro-level and most macro-level chapters. Marion Orr and his colleagues focus on the issue of local democratic decision-making rather than on racial or ethnic justice per se, although their motivation for studying the former is arguably concern about the latter. Orr et al. are interested in how the kind of democratic participation that Miller celebrates gets started and

builds momentum, especially among newcomers to the American political scene. They find that Latinos and (especially) Latinas who are active in their children's schools are also relatively active in several forms of civic engagement. Feedback loops enter the analysis here at the level of individuals; activism in one sphere reinforces activism in another.

As the authors state, they cannot use cross-sectional survey data to make causal assertions [although they find themselves tempted over and over to argue that "involvement in one's local school has an impact on a person's level of political activity" (p. 2)]. From the perspective of democratic participation, the analyst's inability to determine which form of political activity leads to which other form, or whether some unspecified motivation[2] promotes political activism in several arenas at once, is a virtue. The crucial point for this book is that some newcomers are becoming politically engaged, perhaps through several channels and for a variety reasons, and may thereby revitalize urban democratic practices. If cities are to be autonomous and efficacious actors in the American political system as Tocqueville envisioned, and if urban politics is to have a hope of promoting justice among groups, incorporating immigrants into the educational arena, civic engagement, and eventually electoral politics will be essential.

Finally, Michael Fortner's chapter seeks to answer some of the questions that I have posed in response to other chapters, that is to "offer a set of theoretical propositions that clarify when urban politics is autonomous and . . . [to] tease out the implications of these propositions for the study and future of American democracy" (p. 17). He can address this hugely broad goal in a chapter-length essay only through a somewhat curtailed list of considerations. They include the facts that "local municipalities are 'creatures of the state'," but that nevertheless they are " 'functionally specialized' and operate according to 'explicit rules'," that "urban governments extract resources from society and deploy them to create and support their own coercive and administrative organizations," and that a city's delegation in a state legislature may be able to corral a disproportionate share of the state's capacities for its own use (pp. 17-19, quoting respectively Frug and Skocpol).

"The institutional features of urban government can also grant it autonomy from local social classes and organized interests" (p. 22) – which means that a city may, or may not, expend effort to incorporate the disfranchised and reduce inequality, depending on another series of conditions. That indeterminacy accords well with the mixed findings of the other chapters, but does not resolve the question of whether we should cheer or deplore urban independence.

Despite his qualified celebration of the possibilities of urban citizenship, Fortner ends on a curious note of pessimism: "the historical development of the federal government and the globalization of the world's economy systematically crippled the administrative capacity of urban government and. . . threatened the autonomy of urban democracy and vibrance of urban citizenship." Tocqueville's " 'spirit of the city' " is " 'diminished'. . . within the people, and now American democracy is limited" (p. 34-35). I am not so sure. Fortner has not shown the extinction of his set of conditions under which a city may be autonomous and influential– why should we assume that cities can no longer use their functional specialization to extract and use

---

[2] Possibilities include mobilization by others, a sense of political efficacy and optimism, a sense of fury over maltreatment, or a simple desire to get involved and make a difference.

societal resources, or can no longer promote justice? After all, Orr and his colleagues show that new urban residents are engaging in civic activities; Miller shows that advocacy groups, though frustrated, are still advocating; Harris and Kremstein show that in their own way, "med and ed" institutions remain committed to poor, small cities. The optimism of Hulme's Progressive era textbooks may no longer be warranted, but then it never was. Rejecting excessive optimism need not imply accepting excessive pessimism, just as celebrating the national government's decision to override segregationist local authorities in the 1960s does not mean that overriding local autonomy is necessarily desirable a half century later.