Two Cheers for American Cities: Commentary on Urban Citizenship and American Democracy

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

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The editors of *Urban Citizenship and American Democracy* 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 from page 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, empirical regularities, and normative commitments. The chapters are all 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 *Urban Citizenship*. . . start to do just that. Richard Harris elegantly shows 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 uses Tocqueville as a touchstone, Harris’s “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.

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 fears 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 Urban Citizenship. . . .

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 Harris’s, 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). Hulme’s cities, like Harris’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’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 corporations which would cause discomfort to, or increase the danger of, the people’ ” (p. 15-16). Urban autonomy, indeed!

Although Hulme does not discuss Urban Citizenship. . . ’s third theme, he makes it clear that even the most Panglossian textbooks did not venture to depict a racial and ethnic utopia.

1 Harris notes 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).
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 Urban Citizenship. . . , 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). The influence ran from national political discourse to urban self-presentation, not the reverse. In that way at least, Hulme resembles Harris, who also sees cities as more influenced than influencing.

While Hulme implicitly disagrees with the second theme of Urban Citizenship. . . ’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 Harris, 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, post-bellum 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 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 post-bellum 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, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, and their respective Congresses, all did their best to ignore cities completely despite their very different ideological and partisan commitments.

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.

Another source of frustration to the analyst is that empowerment for one local community may come at the expense of empowerment for another. Just as one cannot state that localism always or never favors racial justice, one cannot assume that local communities share interests in racial justice or anything else. That point is made vividly clear in Khalilah Brown-Dean’s chapter on “Counting Bodies and Ballots.” She draws our attention to the representational and policy consequences of putting prisons in rural areas, which means that young urban black men become, perforce, rural men, at least from the perspective of census
enumerators and redistricting commissions. The ironic outcome is that small white towns gain political power, perhaps at the direct expense of large non-white cities.

Brown-Dean has nothing but criticism for this transfer of people and its accompanying transfer of political and economic resources. From the perspective of efforts to promote racial justice in big cities, it is indeed harmful, not to say bizarre. In a few counties at least a quarter of the population is incarcerated—which suddenly makes the county look racially integrated in aggregate data and which might bring it public resources that flow from the use of census data on population and poverty. But from the broader perspective of the three central themes of the volume, the story is a bit more complicated. First, while empowering predominantly white towns by importing incarcerated people of color retards racial justice, it also works to offset a century of rural disempowerment. That is surely not the right strategy for correcting decades of ignoring or exploiting small towns and rural communities, but it does have an ironic bite for analysts committed to equality for all Americans.

Second, the trajectory of American political development might eventually swing away from the pattern traced by Brown-Dean of ever-increasing rural political and economic growth based on ever-increasing urban jail or prison sentences. This point does not contravene anything in her chapter; it is an invitation to her to consider what happens when trends start to reverse course. That is, in recent years more states have moved to reinstate the franchise for ex-felons than to disfranchise those convicted of a felony; does her analysis imply that those formal legal changes will increase cities’ real political power over the next decade or two? In addition, the rate of increase in incarceration has slowed, and some evidence suggests that the number of incarcerated individuals is actually declining. Reduction in sentences for possession of crack cocaine should reinforce the on-going decline in the number of incarcerated young men, as should an intriguing new alliance between liberals appalled at incarceration rates and conservatives appalled at the cost of keeping someone incarcerated. If jails and prisons start to empty, or at least if new ones are no longer needed, will rural communities lose their new political and economic standing, absolutely or relatively? In short, if “urban autonomy is contingent upon the historical development of the American polity,” as the first theme of this volume puts it, can we say the same thing about rural and small town autonomy?

The two remaining chapters are, respectively, the most micro-level and most macro-level. Marion Orr and his colleagues focus on 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”). 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 third variable\(^2\) 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 mutually-reinforcing channels and for a variety of 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 the editors hope, and if urban politics is to have a chance of promoting justice among groups, incorporating immigrants into schools, civic life, and eventually electoral politics will be essential.

Finally, Michael Fortner’s chapter seeks to answer some of the questions that I have posed 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, among others, “the development of the party organizations and politics that link city politics to state and national politics,” “the urban state’s ability to coerce resources from the private sector,” “its relationship to the ‘rise and decline’ of local and global economies,” the fact that “urban governments can operate according to their own logic,” and local demography. Even if curtailed, this list of considerations is daunting to describe and analyze, and I for one wish that Fortner had laid out the theoretical links among the propositions about urban autonomy in a clear graphic display.

Even without such a display, however, Fortner compellingly depicts the rise and fall of urban autonomy in the United States, using New York City as an exemplar. In the century before 1950, large American cities showed increasing levels of “urban autonomy and effective citizenship;” in the half century after 1950, they displayed declining autonomy and “ineffective citizenship.” Cities, in short, fell under the “undue influence of economic elites” and the growing control of states and the federal government. Fortner does not develop this theme in as much detail as I could wish, but his evidence and analysis lead the reader to wonder why cities lost power during the decades that their residents and leaders were increasingly people of color. A causal argument would imply that states, the federal government, and economic elites exercised more power because whites were moving out and blacks and Latinos were perceived to be unable to maintain effective governance (or might be altogether too effective, in disquieting ways, if left alone). A correlational argument would point to the decline in manufacturing, the growth of the car culture, the dissemination of air conditioning, and the change in American immigration laws as explanations for both the rise in non-Anglo urbanites in the northeast and southwest and the decline in urban autonomy. In any case, after 1950, “the racial consequences of these social and economic shifts are . . . worth noting”—and they are comprised mostly by “despairing trends.”

Despite his celebration of the history and possible future of urban autonomy and effective citizenship, Fortner ends by describing two “tragic democratic paradox[es] of the postindustrial city” —a focus on middle class residents and businesses rather than the poor, and the inability of African Americans to use the city to help them escape poverty. The capacity of

\(^2\) Possibilities include mobilization by others, a sense of political efficacy and optimism, fury over maltreatment, or a simple desire to get involved and make a difference.
the city is now “cripple[d].” Along with Amy Bridges in the Introduction, I am not so sure. Fortner has certainly shown variation in the set of conditions under which a city can be autonomous and influential—but not extinction. Might cities again become able to leverage their functional specialization to extract and use federal and state resources, or to induce economic elites to participate in shared and mutually beneficial endeavors? Might urban citizens again seize the chance to become effective participants in governance? 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 shows 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. If increasing incarceration reduced cities’ power, as Brown-Dean shows, then maybe reducing incarceration will enable an increase in that power.

More generally, one can point to some cities’ recent political and policy activities as grounds for not giving in to Fortner’s pessimism, at least across the board. In the face of the federal government’s inability to pass immigration legislation, New York City, New Haven, and other urban areas have created identity cards that give undocumented immigrants standing and access to public resources. In many smaller cities, school boards, librarians, social service workers, and even police are interpreting their professional obligations to be the development of incorporative strategies. The Los Angeles city council, among other places, voted to boycott the state of Arizona in response to its harsh SB 1070 law that promoted “attrition [of undocumented immigration] through enforcement.” New Orleans is experimenting with a system of all charter schools in an effort to improve public school students’ attainment and achievement.

Some innovations are more economic than racial or ethnic. Researchers at the Brookings Institute recently published a book proclaiming that “we’re at the beginning of the wave of growth of innovation districts in the United States. . . . This . . . represents a clear path forward for cities and metro areas” (http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/06/innovation-districts-clear-path-forward-for-cities-and-metro-areas). Their evidence suggests that every new high tech job creates five new jobs in the local area. Gentrification in Atlanta, and gentefication in Los Angeles are certainly displacing low income residents. But they are also increasing cities’ tax bases, which could lead over the next decade or so back to the pre-1950 type of urban self-management. If urban autonomy fosters democratic citizenship and racial justice, these wrenching short term disruptions might end up benefitting many poor city dwellers.

Some of these initiatives are likely to fail, and some may not promote racial justice or democratic governance. But rejecting excessive optimism need not imply accepting excessive pessimism, just as celebrating the national government’s override of segregationist local authorities in the 1960s does not imply rejection of local autonomy a half century later. As authors in Urban Citizenship and American Democracy make clear, cities can be autonomous actors as well as participants in historically based feedback loops, and they can promote as well as retard democratic engagement and racial justice. The questions are, of course, when and how—and this book provides intriguing answers as well as more questions.