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## WORLDS OF URBAN GOVERNANCE: HOW AND WHY THE UNITED STATES IS DIFFERENT

by

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### **Context**

Urban governance is *au courant* in urban and regional studies. It is part and parcel of a broader discursive formation that includes ideas of territorial competition, and of territorial exploitation. One of the developments that has motivated this paper are attempts to understand its contemporary salience through a model of historical change. This is a model that is supposed to apply across all the advanced capitalist countries. I am thinking here of Jessop's (2002) transition from the Keynesian national welfare state to the Schumpeterian workfare state, Erik Swyngedouw's (1997a, 1997b) arguments about glocalization and even David Harvey's (1989) related claims about a transition from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in urban politics.

What strikes me about these claims is how Europe-centric they are, and how they run afoul of the specificity of the American case; which explains my reference in the title of this paper to ‘*worlds* of urban governance.’ This is so for a variety of reasons. In the first place when thinking about American cities there is nothing new about the idea of governance. The term was being used at least by the early ’seventies.<sup>1</sup> There were also practices of coordination among local governments and sometimes with private sector interests that clearly correspond to what we now take to be urban governance.<sup>2</sup>

Second and most significantly urban governance has been embedded in very different conditions in the American case and has assumed quite different forms. It is, for example, a much more organic and bottom-up development than the top-down stimulus it has been given in Western Europe. Partly as a result of this, there are no obvious templates for it; rather solutions are fashioned locally, often with the connivance, even support of the individual states, and producing arrangements that resist easy comparison one with another, except in terms of the particular problems they are designed to solve. The downside of this locality-centered process and the involvement of locality-specific interests, both public and private, is that it makes urban governance something of a fragile creation. This is because there will inevitably be tensions between whatever arrangements get constructed and those interests; and to the extent that they don’t get their way, then they will tend to look elsewhere for salvation, perhaps to the state through a politics of scale.<sup>3</sup>

One way in which this vulnerability has been countered is through a decenteredness of urban governance, so that while one structure may be challenged, overlapping and reinforcing antagonisms can typically be avoided. In any metropolitan area it is hard to identify any one particular set of arrangements. There may be one for metropolitan transportation, in which key agents like airports and downtown business associations work with a purpose-established county or metropolitan agency. There will be another to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Lowdon Wingo edited a series for Resources for the Future with the title “The Governance of Urban Regions” with the first volume (*Reform of Metropolitan Governments*) appearing in 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See Jezierski (1996) on the Pittsburgh case where she describes governance in the greater Pittsburgh area going back to at least the 1940s.

<sup>3</sup> On the politics of scale see Cox (1998).

mediate inward industrial investment and this will almost certainly extend beyond the city into the region beyond. While the ideal of urban governance might be something of a coherent form, in the American instance that coherence has proven highly elusive.

In order to exemplify these points, I now provide three brief case studies. I then turn to an explanation of this particular ‘world of urban governance’ emphasizing just why it is so different from that of Western Europe.

### **Three Case Studies**

#### ***The Columbus Annexation Policy***

In Central Ohio the City of Columbus participates in a set of contractual relations with other municipal governments in the metropolitan area for the provision of water and sewerage. These date back to the 1950s and a debate that was beginning to emerge then about so-called ‘fiscal disparities.’ What this referred to was the emergence at that time, in the context of rapid suburbanization, of changes in the inter-jurisdictional distribution of tax base relative to the demands that local taxes had to satisfy in different parts of the metropolitan area. Typically central cities were the losers from this as retail, office, industrial and high income residential uses moved beyond its boundaries leaving behind a population that was increasingly poor and increasingly dependent on government services, including those of local government.<sup>4</sup> The concern over fiscal disparities, moreover, factored into a broader concern about the jurisdictional fragmentation of metropolitan areas. Division generated a variety of externalities which obstructed planning for the metropolitan area as a whole; as well as foreclosing the possibilities of exploiting economies of scale in public provision. In this context, the ideal of metropolitan integration was widely touted.

It was against this background that the City of Columbus embarked on creating a form of metropolitan governance designed to achieve some of the effects of metropolitan integration, though to its benefit rather than those of the independent suburbs (Cox and Jonas (1993). The plan was to connect provision of water and sewer service to the city’s

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<sup>4</sup> For reviews see Downs (1973) and Newton (1975).

ability to expand geographically and to limit that of the independent suburbs. Columbus would continue to expand by annexation, facilitating its access to the greenfield sites increasingly popular for those large scale real estate projects generating large amounts of tax revenue; while at the same time stifling in effect the ability of other municipalities to do the same. Metropolitan integration would not be achieved, but by stimulating the growth of the City at the expense of other municipalities, something close to it could be accomplished; fragmentation would remain but Columbus would dominate the jurisdictional space and the other ‘fragments’ would remain small and limited in number.

The policy had two distinct aspects. In the first place, the City would henceforth refuse to provide water and sewer services to the so-called ‘unincorporated’ areas that lay beyond the City’s boundary. Previously the county had negotiated with the City for such extension on behalf of new developments. Rather, in future, if developers wanted those services they would have to request annexation of the land in question by the City. Second, the City introduced a policy of water and/or sewer contracts with other municipalities. Independent suburbs wanted to expand but were limited by their existing water and sewer capacity. Expansion would be expensive and, as far as sewage disposal was concerned for some of them, risk the wrath and opposition of the State Department of Health.<sup>5</sup> So contracts with Columbus were attractive. Less attractive were the provisos that the City inserted. In every case, water and/or sewer services would be made available to a municipality for its current area plus an ‘expansion area’: an area into which it too could expand by offering water and sewer services. The problem from standpoint of the contracting municipalities, though, was that Columbus placed severe limits on the magnitude of these expansion areas. Nevertheless, it was something municipalities bought into and with important consequences for their future: not least the fact that Columbus was eventually able to surround them and cut them off from further expansion; something that was to become significant for the future of this form of urban governance later.

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<sup>5</sup> This was because in at least three instances sewage was being released into rivers which were used downstream as part of the City of Columbus’s water supply.

There are several things to note in light of the aims of this paper. First, these sorts of contractual arrangements were specific to Columbus. There are no equivalents in the State of Ohio or anywhere else in the US to my knowledge. It was a local solution to a general problem, made possible by the fact that at the time the problem of suburban-central city fiscal disparities was entering into public discourse, the City of Columbus was still contiguous over substantial parts of its boundary with unincorporated areas; i.e., areas that state law allowed to be annexed.

Second, the initiative came from the City itself and not from some super-ordinate level in the territorial hierarchy. It was not ‘top-down’ and it was not the outcome of some central state initiative. On the other hand, and significantly, it needed the help of the state to suspend some of the barriers it encountered in implementing it. During the early ‘sixties the City had encountered opposition to its annexations from some of the suburban school districts. The latter included both land incorporated into independent suburbs and land that was unincorporated and which could therefore be annexed. The problem was that annexation of the latter by Columbus threatened to decimate enrolments and tax base in the suburban school districts affected. The problem, largely confined to the Columbus area, was finessed through state legislation. Henceforth, municipal and schools annexation would be separated. Municipal annexation would not necessarily entail a transfer of school district land as well. Rather, a new state agency, the state Board of Education would adjudicate and the criterion of adjudication was one that protected the suburban school districts. If the assessed value per pupil in the area to be annexed was higher than that in the school district which would expand in virtue of annexation then it was ruled a ‘tax grab’ and forbidden. So Columbus continued to expand as a municipality but henceforth its school district would remain almost static.

In short this is a structure of urban governance that goes back in time well beyond the current interest in the topic. It was a local response, taking advantage of local conditions, to a general problem that was being faced by many American central cities. This does not mean that more central branches of the state have not been involved. Their role, however,

as in this particular instance, has been more as a relatively passive, enabling condition to be drawn on as and when a local government or set of such governments see fit.

### ***The Local Economic Development Network***

The second case study of urban governance that I want to discuss is something that Andrew Wood and I (1993; 1997) called ‘the local economic development network.’ This was a set of institutionalized arrangements that we discovered in the course of researching the mediation of inward investment in the United States: how the initial interest of some industrial corporation in investing in a particular area came to fruition. This is, of course, something of essential interest to the urban growth coalitions typically at the heart of urban governance in the US. But what we found was that in order to realize those interests they had to be part of a geographically wider structure of governance relations connecting them to the gas and electric utilities that tended to operate on a supra-urban scale.

Historically the gas and electric utilities in the United States have been confined to supplying relatively small though regionally-defined service areas. These rarely conform to particular urban areas. They may include two or more major centers along with many smaller towns: the sorts of places that since the 1970s industrial firms have sought as sites for their branch plants. These questions aside, though, it is the dependence on revenues from a relatively small geographical area that has given the utilities an intense interest in local economic development: the more industrial investment in the area, the greater the demand for their electricity and gas, both directly and, through the growth of employment, indirectly. Accordingly, and since at least the nineteen thirties, they have always had their own economic development departments. One of the functions of these has been to serve as a clearing house of available sites within respective service areas. Firms prospecting for sites typically search over a relatively wide area that is rarely reducible to a particular city and in that regard the utility service area has provided a better fit than, say, the area contained within a given set of municipal boundaries. As a result site owners have lodged their information with the utilities.

Consequently, they have emerged as the first port of call for firms seeking sites, but they can't 'do' local economic development on their own. Rather they have had to construct a wider network of relations – hence the sobriquet 'the local economic development network' – that includes interests in particular municipalities: interests usually associated with urban growth coalitions. These have included both the local Chambers of Commerce and the local governments. The Chambers enter in at the site-visit stage where the prospecting firm has whittled down its possible choices and is selecting among them. So the local Chambers will put together teams of local businesses to respond to questions; usually ones that focus on the local labor market and labor relations. Finally, once a selection is made the local government is brought into the picture as it is the agent that will be expected to provide the necessary land use permits and financial incentives.

In contrast to the contractual network which mediates the provision of water and sewage disposal in the Columbus metropolitan area, this is one that, for the most part, is held together by relations of trust. Trust is of the essence. If an industry locates within a utility's service area, it will gain regardless of which specific town or city it chooses. The incentives for any particular Chamber of Commerce to play its essential part, however, are quite different since it is competing with numerous others in the service area; in addition, where utilities divide a large city between them – a not uncommon occurrence, there is the danger that information about a site search will be shared with the competing one. So there are norms. Chambers 'honor the source', which means that they don't take the information to a competing utility. They also put forth the effort, regardless of the chances of landing the prospect. The same applies to local government. The danger here is that mayors will make a premature announcement; something that many industrial firms don't like since it can disturb relations with localities and workers where they already have facilities. So there is a norm of silence until the firm has given its assent to publicity. And if the norms of trust that underpin the efficient functioning of the network should break down, then the utilities will bring sanctions to bear, avoiding bringing prospects to particular cities.

Once again, there are several things to emphasize here. First, there is nothing recent about this particular structure of governance. It was taking shape well before the Second World War when the utilities, in the wake of the anti-trust legislation that had limited takeovers, created their own local economic development departments designed to attract new investment into respective service areas.

The second is how utterly crucial this particular structure of governance is to particular agents in American cities. Industrial investment is eagerly sought since it facilitates the growth of urban areas and hence the market for all those firms that comprise what Molotch (1976) called ‘the urban growth machine’: the real estate developers, the local media empires, locally owned banks in particular. Once again, this goes back many years. Molotch was writing in 1976 but others made the same point about place-dependent interests and stakes in local economies and indicated an involvement in urban politics considerably prior to the mid-70s (Salisbury 1964; Mollenkopf 1976).

The third point is that this is not a structure of urban governance in the conventional sense. It embraces not just major cities, but also extensive peripheries that take in numerous free-standing smaller towns. This is the decenteredness of urban governance in the United States taken to an extreme. It is a distinct structure of governance in its own right, and covers an area much larger than most other structures that one typically defines as ones of urban governance. More significantly, however, what it underlines is that governance for cities has to respond in its spatial character to the spatiality of the processes it is trying to regulate. In this case, the prospecting practices of industrial firms dictate the spatial form of governance. They conduct their site search over large geographic areas and this is perfectly reasonable given the variety of needs they have to satisfy. So when Honda was looking for a site in the Midwest it wanted a small town with a large labor shed, but close to a major city that would provide it with air transport access for its managers and also, hopefully, suburbs where they would feel comfortable raising their families.

### *Bypassing Urban Governance, or: Who Needs It?*

Unlike the West European case where the construction of urban governance has been with strong inputs and pressures from central states, in the American instance it has tended to be bottom-up, as with both of the cases discussed so far. A major reason for this is the existence of a strong local support base for these initiatives. Cities have anxieties about their tax base: a major reason why the City of Columbus wanted to control annexation in the greater metropolitan area. There is also Molotch's (1976) urban growth machine to be taken into account. Chambers of Commerce are an important part of the local economic development network because they want to be; and they want to be because of pressures from their members, particularly from real estate development interests.

The material interests at the local level are of a quite intense nature. Tensions between the different agents party to a particular structure and the structure itself are often fraught, therefore. And to the extent that they can bolt and hitch their ambitions to other wagons they may well do so; which can make structures of urban governance in the United States quite fragile. In other words, urban governance can get bypassed as firms or local governments seek to liberate themselves from its constraints or from the fact that, as usual, it is always tilted in someone's favor and not in everyone's. It is at this point that historically, at least, the politics of scale has played an important role. Just as the state can be significant in facilitating the construction of structures of governance – this was certainly the case in allowing the City of Columbus to create its network of water and sewer contracts with other municipalities – so its regulatory and fiscal power can be harnessed to the ends of those who at some previous time, had subordinated their interests to that of the whole. I provide one example of this here.

The renegade element in this instance was a firm trading under the name of the Limited, one of the largest employers in the Columbus area. The Limited is headquartered in Columbus and owns numerous retail chains with a national presence. Its founder and CEO is a person called Leslie Wexner who has recently branched out into real estate development. Hugely wealthy, he can turn his personal fortune to realizing his real estate

ambitions,<sup>6</sup> and does not necessarily have to work through the established institutional mechanisms. But in turn this can undermine those mechanisms.

Wexner's initial real estate development foray was a very large residential project in excess of 5,000 acres in the northeast of the county. By the 'nineties he was expanding his interests to include a major mixed-use project alongside an interstate (I-270) that would include retail, office and residential. The retail, moreover, was no standard mall project. Rather what he envisaged was something new: a town center in the suburbs that would be, or so he anticipated, a major attraction throughout the metropolitan area. The development when totally filled out will cover approximately 1,200 acres or almost two square miles. This was to become known as Easton.

Obviously accessibility was a major consideration. The development is just five miles north of the airport with rapid freeway access both to the downtown and to the suburbs, since one of the highways in question encircles the built-up area of the city. There were, however, some troubling aspects of the accessibility question. Although Easton was just to the south of an already-existing interchange, Wexner wanted his own interchange. The problem was not the expense of the interchange itself; he was happy to pay that particular bill. The problem, which was going to attract the attention of federal highway engineers, was that of 'weave': interchanges that were too close to one another so that cars entering the freeway from the first interchange would risk colliding with cars maneuvering to exit at the second. In order to remedy this, extensive and very expensive road works would be required: \$232 million in total.

There were in fact two separate road blocks. One was the money, which apart from \$18m put up by Wexner for design studies would have to come from the State of Ohio. The other was obtaining federal permission since it was an interstate highway. With respect to the money there were other major highway projects in the Columbus area which had already lined up for funding some years previous. These included widening the highly congested northern section of the outer belt (I-270); the other was the reconstruction of

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<sup>6</sup> In 2006 he was listed by Forbes Magazine as the 88<sup>th</sup> richest person in the United States at over \$3 billion.

the inner belt (I-670). Both had the strong support of the City of Columbus and the Chamber of Commerce. Wexner, however, was not keen to take his place in the queue. In the event he jumped it, and his immense financial resources were instrumental in helping him do that.

The key was his relation with the State Governor at the time, one George Voinovich (Newkirk 1995). Any decision on the allocation of State funds to the Easton highway project rested with the Ohio Department of Transportation. The director of this was one of Voinovich's political appointees. As luck would have it, or perhaps it was judgment, Wexner was a major campaign fund donor and fund raiser for the governor. Not only that, but reputedly Voinovich used his power as governor to pull the necessary strings with the federal government to "help clear a bureaucratic roadblock" (Newkirk 1995: 38). So the queue for highway projects in the Columbus area and an understanding among their respective protagonists that it should be honored was effectively made moot and Easton could move ahead regardless of the wishes of the City of Columbus or those other developers who had put their faith in some vision of 'what was good for the city as a whole.'

This, therefore, is a different case study than the two others. It says little about urban governance structures themselves but draws out some of the implications of how urban governance in the US is related to quite intensely felt local interests. And if it doesn't help in a particular instance and you have the resources to try alternative strategies to getting what you want, then urban governance will be sidestepped and will lose its effectiveness and therefore legitimacy.

### **The Difference that the State Makes**

I have argued that the circumstances attending the emergence of what are defensibly forms of urban governance have been quite different in the US from those in Western Europe. Not only do we encounter them much earlier in American cities than in Western European counterparts; the balance between bottom-up and top-down forces is quite different. In the US there has been a powerful local constituency, bridging public and

private interests in favor of urban governance. The sorts of measures taken in Western Europe by central states in order to stimulate collaborative arrangements between local government agencies, for example, are quite foreign to the American experience. The absence of some national template has also helped to encourage local experimentation so that there is very, very considerable variety in what emerges at the local level, often breaching urban boundaries as in the case of the local economic development network, though this has sometimes required some cooperation from the individual states. At the same time, as we have just seen, the intensity of some of the local interests responsible for urban governance initiatives can also make the resultant agreements and understandings quite fragile.

What I have referred to as the urban growth machine has to be factored into any understanding of this different world of urban governance. For the most part there is nothing quite like it in Western European cities. The sorts of place-dependence at the heart of the growth machine (Cox and Mair 1988) just don't exist to the same degree. National chain banking dominates and locally owned and operated banks are rare. So too are the sorts of media conglomerates involving newspapers, radio and TV stations that are so much a part of the American scene and which are so intensely dependent on specific local markets. The same applies to gas and electric companies. Although in the US they tend to be organized regionally the big metropolitan areas are so important to their revenues that they actively support major development initiatives there. In Western Europe, on the other hand, national networks tend to prevail. Finally, the sort of dependence of local governments on locally generated revenues that one experiences in the US is uncommon on the other side of the Atlantic.

So in the American case there might certainly be a presumption in favor of expecting grass roots initiatives in the localities as respective urban growth coalitions struggle to create conditions favorable to inward investment. However, I do not think that this has been the decisive consideration. In order to solve the puzzle of why the US constitutes such a very different world of urban governance I think that one has to turn to the structure of its state. By the standards of the parliamentary democracies of Western

Europe, operating for the most part in the context of unitary states, this turns out to be very peculiar indeed.

In the United States the fragmentation of formal power is of quite staggering proportions.<sup>7</sup> This is in part a function of the checks and balances inscribed in the separation of powers. It is also expressed territorially in what must be the most radically federal country in the world.<sup>8</sup> In turn the individual states have seen fit to delegate some of their powers to local governments; and these often turn out to be ones important to local development. It is a territorial structure of the state which facilitates a territorialization of interests and at the same time, facilitates their realization. In short, the local in its different expressions – local government, local representatives in state and federal legislative assemblies – constitutes what one might call a very significant power center which is attractive from the standpoint of those local private interests, not least those of the urban growth machines, seeking favors.

There are numerous aspects to this. The first are the powers and responsibilities of local governments. On the one hand, their dependence on locally raised revenues makes them as interested in local growth as the growth machine, so they are very vulnerable to its blandishments. On the other, they also enjoy numerous powers that can be turned to promoting local growth. They have land use planning powers which exist in the vast majority of states with virtually no state oversight at all. They have the power to annex any unincorporated land to which they are contiguous. And they can raise money for public works through the sale of bonds on the private bond market.

Second, representation in state and federal legislative bodies is highly territorialized. By this I mean that the structure of limits and possibilities is such as to create a tight bond between a representative and the local electorate. Representatives feel that they have to deliver and cannot hide behind the imperatives of national party agenda and the discipline

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<sup>7</sup> Epstein (1986) is particularly helpful on the peculiarities of the American state.

<sup>8</sup> For example, it would be hard to make a case out for the US having one national welfare state; rather it has fifty of them, one for each state. While there is some national legislation, labor law, education, workers health and safety are all to a very high degree determined within the boundaries of individual states.

of party whips. The reason for this is that they have to run the gauntlet of the primary election. Anyone can stand for election as the party's nominee at the next legislative elections, but that means that they have to put together a program that is specifically geared to local interests.

Third, not only do representatives, once elected, feel an obligation to try to deliver on their program, the structure of the American state is such that it helps them to deliver. Part of the secret here is the committee system. All legislative proposals originate from members of the legislature and not from the executive branch as in the parliamentary democracies of Western Europe. But before they can be voted on they have to be examined by a committee. Committees are organized with respect to the substance of bills, so there are committees for banking, for agriculture, for maritime affairs, and so on. Most importantly, and for the most part, representatives get to sit on the committees of their choice. So a representative from a city with strong financial service interests will almost certainly gravitate to the banking committee where she will dispose of very considerable power: the power to amend, the power to horse trade with other committee members so as to secure a draft bill that will be to the liking of her financial industry constituents, and then finally to join with others in a decision to refer the bill for a vote or to kill it, which means that it will never see the light of day.

Fourth, and assuming that a bill does get passed on for a vote, once again representatives have what is by Western European standards, extraordinary leeway on most issues in deciding how they will vote. Parties are relatively weaker determinants of how assembly persons, Congresspersons and Senators will vote. Bipartisan coalitions, perhaps reflecting urban-rural differences or interregional ones, are extremely common as is log rolling; particular coalitions will get what they want in exchange for supporting what some other coalition will be looking for in the future.

If the weakness of the parties facilitates local deal making so too is this the case at the State level. Logrolling between the representatives of different areas of the State is the norm rather than the exception. To some degree this has been formalized in a reciprocity

rule. According to this State assemblies won't reject legislation relating to a particular city submitted by the State delegation from that city so long as there is support from the delegation in question.<sup>9</sup> This means that special legislation of the sort which facilitates governance arrangements specific to particular cities or urban areas, so long as all the representatives from that area agree on it, can gain legislative agreement without much difficulty.

The way in which the state tends to be structured in Western Europe is quite different. The fact that the executive and legislative branches overlap, with ministers sitting also as legislators, imposes a quite different logic. Government leaders depend on majority support if they are to continue in office. Party discipline has to be much more intense. There has to be some central control of the choice of who will represent the party. Accordingly the scope for the representation of local interests is very greatly diminished.

Without this very distinctive state structure the processes structuring urban governance would likely be quite different and more akin to those in Western Europe. If the state did not endow local government and local representatives with the powers that they have then private interests would at the very least place far less emphasis on organizing through a local growth coalition. Rather other forms of organization, possibly according to positions in the social division of labor and working for legislative relief at more central levels would be more prominent, as indeed is the case in Western Europe. And then there would no longer be two separate 'worlds of governance' and one might well be able to generalize in a trans-Atlantic mode.

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<sup>9</sup> Historically in Illinois Chicago could exercise power by striking bargains with downstate Republicans and Democrats, leaving the Republican-dominated suburbs out of the deal (Weir, 1996). This allowed Chicago to acquire support for local development projects and a broader base for financing many city costs, including social spending. A common pattern was that the city agreed to support the governor's budget in exchange for major economic development initiatives. This was how a Regional Transportation Authority joining Chicago and its independent suburbs came into being, even though suburban representatives opposed it fearing that they would become responsible for the costs of the insolvent Chicago Transit Authority.

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