

Book Review

Theories of Urban Politics, second edition. By Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio. Los Angeles: Sage, Inc., 2009.

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This year, a former Chicago community organizer was elected president and promptly appointed two New Yorkers as White House advisers on urban issues – the first time since the Carter administration that cities have had an in-house voice. These promising changes fortuitously coincide with the publication of the second edition of *Theories of Urban Politics* (TUP). Hence, urban studies are poised for a mini-renaissance. Will praxis meet theory to propel our understanding of and appreciation for cities and urban life to new levels? The TUP editors explicitly pitch their volume to an audience beyond the academy: Hey, they asked this retired Newark, NJ city administrator (nee comparative politics professor) to review it. My reflections therefore address both accessibility to practitioners through clarity of presentation and stylistic elan, and the intellectual virtuosity and creativity the respective authors bring to their presentations.

David Imbroscio and Jonathan Davies are mid-career scholars who bring a combination of impressive published research and passion for the subject matter to their editing. The selections they include are as diverse as the urban politics field. Some of the theories are centered on concepts, others on categories, which leads the editors to organize the book, somewhat uncomfortably, into sections labeled “power,” “governance” and “citizens” – isn’t all politics about power, Kataoka’s contribution notwithstanding (see below)? They could have chosen other schemes, e.g., disciplinary labels. The “power” section’s theories – community power, regime theory, Marxism, and post-structuralism – tend toward political economy; “governance” – new institutionalism, regionalism, leadership, governance, and globalization effects in the non-western world – tilts in the direction of government and geography; and “citizens” – poverty, race, gender/sexuality, social capital, and social movements – seems sociologically inspired.

Peter John’s prologue provides a neat rationale for studying urban politics, “numerosity”

and “propinquity,” the former providing large numbers of handy cases, and the latter a condensed and often intense form of politics that qualitatively differs from higher levels of organization. In my experience, numerosity combined with the practical, lived experience of propinquity, makes the study of urban politics especially challenging. Scholars of national, international and comparative politics, by choice or necessity, often adopt bird’s eye-view research designs that obviate direct subject interaction. After more than three decades of living in and working for the City of Newark, I still pause when asked about its politics. Which of the many realities of my city do I draw upon in replying? We can ill afford to forget that the study of urban politics affects real, visible people we know. As such, it straddles the boundary between subjective, personal experience and objective knowledge, participation and observation. Our presence in the empirical universe we study places added responsibility on us to get our research right.

Geddes does a nice job of summarizing Marxism as it applies to urban politics. He shows that, at its best, Marxist scholarship can, indeed, bridge the gap between sweeping generalization and the particularities of not only actual empirical analysis but also governance. On the other hand, Geddes does not attempt to break new ground or suggest new directions, other than making a strong case for the continuing relevance of Marxist analysis to modern urban politics. I see Marxism (from a sympathetic perspective) as becoming increasingly defensive as it endeavors to subsume neo-liberalism, gender and race theory, and related popular perspectives such as those proffered by Mike Davis. But its core concept – class struggle – will, deservedly, remain a key component of urban if not more general political studies.

Harding’s concise, critical history of “community power” succeeds because it is eminently readable and focuses on a theoretical controversy. Everybody loves an argument, and the debate between elitists and pluralists and their intellectual successors is one of the best and most enduring in our business. Practitioners, enmeshed as they are in shaping and being shaped by the policy preferences of elites, can relate to “structural forces” if they are defined as the influences of higher levels of government and the regional economy on their cities. Harding does succeed in explicating this link. An obvious problematic in John’s rationale for the unique niche cities provide

researchers, one that Harding signs onto, is that the accessibility of elites and non-elites for interviews can bias research toward individualist as opposed to structural explanations. Does ease of research result in “suspicion of structural explanations” (p. 37), or is it the reverse? Perhaps this can only be answered by interviewing...researchers.

Mossberger’s work with Stoker has been central to the conceptual refinement of regime theory, the predominant mode of analysis in urban politics, which she presents comprehensively and economically in TUP. Descriptions of theories should provoke thought and controversy among readers. You finish the chapter but can’t stop thinking about its content. I only wish Mossberger had done more to convey the passion – some of it personal, given the relatively small community of urban politics scholars who are actively engaged in the subject – with which regime theory has been debated over the past scholarly generation by, e.g., Stone, his protégé Imbroscio and sympathetic critic Davies.

Mossberger’s caveats regarding the application of regime analysis to cross-national comparative analysis are right on. “Governance” is far too vague and general a rubric under which to subsume regime theory and whatever other modes of politically-mediated production are accomplished, or not, in cities. I look for further contributions from her in our quest for conceptually rigorous comparative schema that can incorporate regimes as a type. We should also make regime *structure* a theoretical issue. Horan, for example, argues strongly for race as a structure along with the state and the market; gender should be treated similarly. Does structure vary by national political context, or not? Much work remains.

In the Tao Te Ching, Lao-Tzu says, “A good scientist has freed himself of concepts and keeps his mind open to what is” (Mitchell, quoted in Frank, p. 161). This succinctly captures Kataoka’s explication of post-structural theory, an interpretive critique in the Marxist tradition. Post-structural analysis, to Kataoka, challenges the very “assumption that politics is a function of power” (p. 82). Urban politics should be an open question, she says. But assumptions are not definitions. And politics is generally defined in terms of power.

“Critique allows for the chance interplay” of components of “the urban” (p. 84). When we make ourselves open to the “unrealized

possibilities of the urban” (p. 84) as Kataoka urges, we’re talking about contingencies, and how to incorporate them into our thinking about cities. But thinking takes time, while the contingencies of urban politics demand action. The rub, Kataoka acknowledges, is that acting without thinking is “reckless” (p. 82). The denouement? “The very project of theory-building is counter to post-structuralism, which implies that we can think otherwise at any moment” (p. 83). Whew! This is an unsettling chapter – but it further unsettles my own thinking about politics, for which I give Kataoka props.

Institutionalism is a pillar of political studies. But at times during my reading of Lowndes’s clearly written and accessible explication of the approach I felt like she was casting it as broadly as “urban politics” itself. Care must be taken to define and delimit the key concepts, as Lowndes acknowledges. Perhaps it would help to specify what new institutionalism is *not*. In her conclusion, for example, Lowndes mentions ethnography as a method for studying the subject. Here, she moves “institutions” conceptually close to “culture.” Hence, we are led to wonder how it differs from political culture. That said, political studies without institutions are a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, institutionalism, as she conceptualizes it, could easily encompass regime theory, as defined by Mossberger and Stokes. It’d help to know if this is what Lowndes intends.

Savitch and Vogel correctly label conventional theories of regionalism and urban scale as normative. These theories, to which practitioners who read the well-written chapter will relate, have traditionally been apolitical, conceptualizing local jurisdictions and their governing authorities as black boxes. The joining of power and territory, which the authors describe as an exciting new theoretical direction for theories of scale, is, in my opinion, merely an additional factor to weigh in urban political analysis. Rusk’s (1993) work comes to mind as already accomplishing this fusion – and reminding us of the centrality of intergovernmental relations, which would mean state-local rules of the game (“new institutionalism”) including the key role of governors in the U.S, and central government authority over local governing arrangements in the U.K. The authors also promote the incorporation of human agency into regionalism through “reterritorialisation” as an approach that will “help

to revitalize the field of urban politics and propel it back into the mainstream of political science” (p. 121). Huh? Only if one ignores the other theories in this book that account for both agency and space can such a sweeping claim for regional theory be made.

With regard to leadership, Greasley and Stoker wisely leave unchallenged Stone’s contention that the measure of an elected official is his/her determination to swim against the tide, to promulgate the unpopular policy. They authors do not suggest new directions; they do succinctly summarize the literature, pose key questions and provide provisional answers from the empirical literature, all in a style that those of us who are involved in urban government and politics can relate to.

A neglected aspect of leadership theory is the halo effect of charismatic or pathbreaking office-holders. The long-term outcomes are important. Many from the early wave of idealistic and highly competent – in addition to being youthful and diverse – persons who were recruited by Newark mayor Kenneth A. Gibson (1970-1986), the third African-American chief executive of a major U.S. city, are still at it in positions around the country. It was the start he gave these people, who might not have been able to gain such experience in any other local government setting, that has rippled through local, state and federal government for almost two generations.

As a career-long city government administrator, I read Kjaer’s chapter on governance and bureaucracy with great anticipation – and was not disappointed. Writing in a style that’s accessible to practitioners, Kjaer adumbrates the kind of role for bureaucrats in governance – as opposed to old public administration and new public management – theory that most of us will appreciatively recognize: “Technical competence is no longer enough, as social competence matters too” (p. 142). Kjaer additionally takes issue with the tendency among many governance theorists to equate participation and inclusiveness with bringing various interests to the table. Wrong, as she effectively illustrates with case examples where resource inequality prevails. Her recognition of the tension between specificity and generality in comparative, cross-national research is additionally useful in a chapter on bureaucracy, which manifests itself in all kinds of organizational forms both within and across political systems. And, she

recognizes that bureaucracy is a *component* of governance, not a theory per se.

Stren does what he can with globalization and urban issues outside the West, given the possibly unbridgeable gap between First and Third World theories. The explanations of non-Western urbanization and urbanism that he reviews – these are not really full-blown theories – are all macro in scope. Stren suggests one refreshingly new perspective – really a concept – labeled by its author, Bayat, “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (p. 164). This concept does not, however, offer hope of unifying urban theory or even improving its comparability across development worlds. Nor does Stren offer any new substantive or methodological directions.

One older scheme devised by Huntington (1971), to compare the rate, scope and direction of *change* in the power and substance of the components of political systems might offer a resolution. Huntington’s national level components – culture, structure, groups, leadership and policy – could of course be traded in for others thought to be common to urban politics at a necessarily high level of generalization. The advantage of this scheme is that its focus on comparing change addresses the essence of politics while avoiding many of the troublesome issues that the authors in this book cite.

Sydney’s chapter is one of the book’s models: A well-organized review of the theoretical and empirical literature that is accessible to, and would benefit, practitioners and scholars equally. And she concludes with her own proposal for new theoretical and research directions. The constructivist perspective Sidney recommends – “interpretations shape social reality” (p. 185) – recalls “framing,” which has been all the rage among U.S. political consultants over the past several years and also has to do with using language to set the terms of political action and public policy. Her chapter, in balancing Third World and U.S. perspectives, and Stren’s, leave hanging the issue of the explosion in Third World working class immigration to First World cities. Large percentages of long-term residents are excluded from formal civic participation through their irrelevance to *electoral* politics. And therein lies an opportunity to integrate and synthesize First World and non-Western theories through contextual political studies of these groups in their local settings.

J. Phillip Thompson's race and urban theory contribution is a corrective to general analytical models that should be required reading for not only political science graduate students – if not their professors – but also local government practitioners throughout urban America. As a long time participant-observer of racialized politics, I find Thompson's analysis spot on. Curiously and unfortunately, however, he fails to recognize Adolph Reed's seminal article on the Black Urban Regime (1988) and subsequent, theoretically-relevant explication of black urban political behavior in "Stirrings in the Jug" (1999). Thompson's brief assessment of "the state of urban theory regarding race" is primarily a starting point, or rallying cry, for theorizing race. He does not offer a theory or seek to promote an approach proffered by one or more other scholars.

Garber's critical analysis of theories of gender and sexuality in urban politics is another that should be required reading – especially for practitioners, who tend in my experience to harbor institutional if not personal biases. It is also a chapter that more fully addresses theory, as opposed to rehearsing empirical findings. Garber stresses the stretching of "the political" in this theorizing, correctly arguing that "power," the stuff of our discipline, is the appropriate unifying concept for the very diverse strands of gender and sexuality theory. An excellent way to square the circle she circumnavigates. In the spirit of Horan's call for race to be conceptualized as a structure in regime analysis, I would suggest that gender and sexuality receive the same consideration. Also, there is a nice connection to be made with "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary," as proffered by Stren with regard to Third World urban political studies in Garber's observation that gender theories of urban politics are shifting toward a concern with "more oppositional, informal or everyday spatial politics" (quote by Tonkiss 2005, p. 59).

Sullivan's politics and social capital contribution points out that the concept is too often linked to normative outcomes and, like regime theory, valorizes cooperation over conflict. For that reason, as she implies, social capital is too often a slogan rather than a concept in the hands of activists and/or practitioners. That said, Sullivan's chapter is relatively straightforward, well-written and practitioner-friendly. Social capital, as she explains it, operates in an urban environment

that is really a national context writ small: Rural, suburban or non-urban could have been substituted for urban without changing much else about the chapter. I find the concept to have plenty of explanatory appeal in my thinking about Newark and New Jersey's other big cities. When I try to operationalize it, however, I run into meaning and methods issues, e.g., the conceptual boundary between bonding and bridging capital. Further, any asset may be thought of as capital – intellectual, human, financial, political, etc. Given the encompassing nature of "social," I also question where one kind of capital ends and another begins. Hence, in my own research I favor other conceptual tools.

Rabrenovic has written a straightforward, efficient and effective analysis of urban social movement theory and research that is generalizable to cross-national analysis. She does not make a strong case for the distinctiveness of urban as opposed to non-urban social movement theory. It is only reasonable to expect social movements to be more of an urban phenomenon, but they can also be rural – think organization in the heartland against farm mortgage foreclosures, immigrant movements in, e.g., Georgia. Perhaps it's because I have a more romantic notion of social movements than, say, institutions – my political coming-of-age was participation in the Southern civil rights movement – that I was disappointed this chapter did not "speak to me" by conveying a sense of the theory being an intellectually exciting scholarly path to pursue. I finished several chapters by thinking, "gee, I need to take another – or even a first – look at this literature, by seeing some of the research I've been doing in light of the theoretical propositions or new directions presented. A bit of "la joie de la recherche" would add much to the promoting of social movement theory to readers.

In baseball, the cleanup hitter bats fourth; in TUP, he's 16th. And who would place Clarence Stone anywhere else? Rising to the occasion with a nine-point prescription for building urban scholarship around refashioning local democracy, Stone makes a spirited argument for bringing citizens, especially those with little or no connection to local politics, into our analyses, primarily by addressing how they interact with public policies that governing coalitions implement. His concept of a local politics that is ordered by the policy cycle is all about power relations. How do policies play out when the

coalition's rubber hits the public's road? Who gets what, when and how?

Stone's concerns are important but hardly new and recall a previous generation of scholarship. The temporal context and scholarly jargon may have been different, but the literature from 25-30 years ago (based on research conducted from the 1960s onward) did indeed factor non-elite, non-state and lower-SES groups and interests into their analytical equations. Here, I'm thinking of, e.g., Katznelson's "urban trenches" and Cunningham's "Power, participation and Local Government: The Communal Struggle for Parity" (1983). Katznelson, in particular, addresses an issue Stone does not, that the potential exists for a local democracy forged within *economic* rather than political institutions, i.e., workplace democracy – however quaint that notion might seem c. 2009. Indeed, it may be time in the current context of a greater openness to a public sector role in "fixing" the economy for a younger generation of scholars to pour this old content into new concepts and subject the results to a serious tasting.

In sum: Imbroscio and Davies have edited an important contribution to the field of urban political studies, one that holds the potential – however distant in the reality-based world – of influencing practitioners as well as scholars. Read on; think on; argue on!

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Urban News

Urban News is published three times each year as Spring, Summer, and Fall issues. Deadlines for submission of material are:

Spring issue	March 1
Summer issue	June 1
Fall issue	October 1

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