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Author
Hall, Peter

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URBAN ACTORS: PUPPETS, AD LIBBERS, OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

Peter Hall with the members of CP 250,
Spring 1986*

In urban planning conflicts, how do we view the actors? Do we see them as constrained by their class position to play roles already predestined for them? Or do we regard them as free agents, playing parts in an unstructured and unscripted drama in which each piece of the action provides the trigger for the next? Or something in between? Most of the rich contemporary debate in the literature of urban politics, it seems to me, centers on this central question of the degree of freedom allowed both to individual actors, to groupings of these individuals, and to coalitions between these groups.

Harvey (1985), taking issue with Castells' *The City and The Grassroots* (Castells, 1983), argues that Castells finally fails to recognize the constraints that Marxian class categories place upon individual actors and on groups defined in non-Marxian terms—for instance, women and gays. Harvey then tries to construct a body of theory that sustains the Marxian underpinnings but that accommodates the evident fact of great diversity and complexity in the conflicts and alliances among different groups and jurisdictions in the contemporary capitalist city. He sets out his position:

> The fundamental Marxist conception, as I see it, is of individuals and social groups, including classes, perpetually struggling to control and enhance the historical and geographical conditions of their own existence. How they struggle—individually or collectively, through coalitions or confrontations—has important implications. But we also know that the historical and geographical conditions under which they struggle are given, not chosen (Harvey, 1985, p. 163).

And he goes on to specify how, in a context like the contemporary United States, they are "given": "In a capitalist society, we know that social life is reproduced through the circulation of capital, which implies class relations and struggle, accumulation and innovation, and periodic crisis" (Harvey, 1985, p. 163). To spell this out, ruling-class coalitions manage pieces of urban space in their own interests, with more or less success. And, Harvey allows, they may do so in extremely diverse ways:

> ... this is not to say that all kinds of successful specializations, particular mixes of urban economy and divisions of labor, ruling-class alliances and divergent political forms, cannot coexist. The uniqueness of each urban region is not eliminated by capitalism any more than the individual firm loses its unique qualities ... But the uniqueness has to be seen as historically and geographically contingent. The combinations, arrived at through voluntaristic and autonomous struggles, are in the event contingent upon processes of capital accumulation and the circulation of associated revenues in space and time (Harvey, 1985, p. 159).

As I have pointed out in a review of Harvey's book (Hall, 1986), here he may be misplacing his criticism; for in his book Castells, too, concludes that finally all these movements are doomed because the historical conditions do not permit their success: Marxian analysis continues to provide some kind of final constraint. In any event, as I have argued there, Harvey's argument is pitched at a very high level of theoretical generality. At this level, the problem is that it becomes almost metaphysical: if you believe that it is so, then it is so. Others of us, who share the belief that the state of socio-economic evolution must powerfully constrain actors in any particular situation, are concerned to test the question: what degrees of freedom do these actors, in real places at real times, actually appear to have? Or, to rephrase it in Harvey's language, what exactly do we mean by that phrase "in the event contingent"? That, it seems to me, is the nub of the question; and it can be addressed only through detailed case studies, in which we constantly seek to relate the particular circumstances to the general socio-economic framework.

It is particularly interesting in the United States because of the fact that this is an extremely pluralistic society. Advanced capitalism is very advanced here, and that means an extremely complex structure of classes (in the Marxian sense), in which the same person can effectively be a member of more than one class at different times and in different roles. Further, an extremely decentralized political system, with much freedom given—at least on paper—to local jurisdictions, means that this complexity has ample space to express itself in the political arena. Not for

nothing, I believe, did the pluralist school of political science, with its emphasis on dispersed power and shifting coalitions, and with outcomes determined by disjointed incrementalism, first get developed and first gain widespread credence in the United States. Therefore, local American case studies would seem to provide an exceptionally good way to examine at close quarters how decisions do actually get made.

To test this, I asked class members of CP 250 in the Spring Semester, 1986, to conduct individual studies each based on a discrete planning decision that involved a measure of local controversy. For each, they should try to identify the actors, understand their interests, analyze their strategies—including coalition-building and influence-making—and try to evaluate the outcome in terms of gainers and losers. Then, in class, we tried to discuss the results and to see how far they contributed to a theory of political behavior.

Almost needless to say, the result was a mixture of success and failure. We certainly did not get anywhere near a unified theory. But we did think that we got closer to an understanding of how the forces worked in particular socio-politico-spatial contexts, which made a contribution to such a theory. One problem in practice was that, because the students came from such diverse geographical backgrounds, it was difficult to make cross-comparisons. Because of this, though it is invidious to exclude many fine contributions from other places, I want to concentrate on four papers that, in one way or another, deal with the same theme: the clash between development and environmental conservation in the extended San Francisco Bay region.

Four California Case Studies

Rudolph Marchese's paper deals with a plan developed by the City of Oakland for the North Oakland Hills area, in June 1985. Intended to provide an orderly framework for expected development of the hills following the availability of water there, produced by the professional planners, without consultation with the existing residents, it was an elaborate scheme that involved cluster housing, road improvements, and extensive parking spaces. The residents, at a meeting attended by no less than 350 people, vociferously objected; the planning commission, backing off in some panic, asked for amendments. The planners came back with a minimally-amended version; there was another stormy meeting. The plan was finally accepted by the planning commission in January 1986, but was then thrown out by the city council in March; they resolved to work with the residents to reach an acceptable plan.

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Marchese, considering this saga, reaches several conclusions. First, it is not clear why anyone should have thought a plan necessary; the residents were not asking for one. Even if a plan was seen as necessary for the undeveloped part of the hills—where, by definition, there were no residents to object—it was far from clear why it should be extended to cover the already-developed area. The planners in fact regarded the planning commission, not the public, as their clients. The commission did not see the problem either, and seem to have thought that all the public needed was a little education. In fact the whole planning procedure took place in a political vacuum until the city council, by now concerned about re-election, intervened.

To those involved, this was clearly an important and even impassioned struggle. The question is to what extent we can regard it as a class conflict. The planners, it could well be argued, were representing development interests by producing a plan that would have allowed residential development in a prime area which had remained undeveloped because of a natural constraint. And doubtless, as we shall see in Fremont, there were those who would rather have seen no development. But the argument did not concern the undeveloped area; it was totally focussed on the already-developed area, where the residents thought the plan was over-formal and fussy. To be sure, they were guarding their interests as consumers (this, with regard to residents anywhere, is simply a truism), but it is not at all clear that they were governed by economic motives. At the heart of the controversy was a fight about how the area ought to look, with the residents asking to be left alone. If class interests and the circulation of capital are at work in this tale, it is at several removes.

Kathryn Studwell-Colley's study of a land-use planning initiative in Fremont is superficially similar, but there are important differences. Fremont, on the southeast corner of the San Francisco Bay, is unique among East Bay communities in that all its attractive hill areas have remained undeveloped. By the early 1980s, however, all other land was effectively developed or awaiting development; only the hills were left. So a battle between developers and conservationists was almost certain, though apparently the professional planners in Fremont did not anticipate it. When the issue emerged, at the end of the 1970s, the planning commission appointed a seventeen-member citizen commission to study it. They recommended effectively a development reserve overlay until services were available, after which developments could go ahead on lots as small as half an acre except on steep slopes, and with architectural review. They had decided that zoning was the only feasible control because they had been advised to that end. In fact, a new right-wing city council threw out the proposal. This triggered the formation of a

Committee to Save the Hills, which launched a campaign; it eventually resulted in the passage of an initiative based on a modified version of the committee's recommendations, in November 1981. The new council, dominated by planning sympathizers, is working on a design ordinance to evaluate the merits of all proposed structures.

The interesting point that emerges from this study is the broad base of support that had developed for the measure. The planners and the planning commission supported it. It went through widespread and prolonged public review. Even the former city council, though it did originally reject the measure contained in it, did not try to block it after passage. Studwell-Colley's analysis is that the members were pro-development, thought that this was what the voters wanted, and were simply inexperienced. The big mistake was on the part of the planners, who ought to have anticipated the movement for controls earlier. Both politicians and planners, therefore, proved—as in Oakland—maladroit.

What emerged in Fremont, as earlier occurred in Santa Cruz and Tiburon, was a strong anti-growth movement, especially among younger and better-educated voters. These were a minority—the measure passed with the support of a mere one-tenth of registered voters—but, as so often in such cases, a passionate and well-organized minority. Pluralist theory will explain the outcome readily enough; the question is whether such an analysis misses deeper layers of significance.

Certainly, there is a lot at stake economically here. The development of the Fremont hills will make fortunes for some, and these developers were strongly against the measure. At the end, since the measure could not restrict growth altogether, what it has done is to ensure that it will be low-density—that is, expensive—development; the hills will become an exclusive high-income area. What that will mean for the profits remains to be seen; the balance sheet will not necessarily be that negative. Those who will gain are the future residents, plus those who already live nearby; those who will lose are lower-income people who will be excluded from the area. It is possible to analyze this process in Harvey's Marxian categories, by talking (as he does) of consumption capital; the question must be what this adds to the depth and sophistication of the analysis.

Catherine Carey's paper on the Golden Bear project, an office and shopping development in the center of Berkeley, deals specifically with three groups of actors: the developers, the local residents, and the city council. Here, albeit in a different geographical setting, was a conflict similar to that in Fremont. The residents preferred no development at all; the developers clearly wanted it, but would have been willing to compromise on a

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scheme that incorporated some attractive community features. The then-council, as originally in Fremont, was pro-development but was acutely aware of the potential attack from the left-wing, conservation-minded opposition.

Carey analyzes the decision process using a game-theoretic framework. In the first stage, developers and council played a cooperative, positive-sum game; both were in favor of rezoning the site from mixed commercial-residential to pure commercial. In the second, residents played a zero-sum game with the council. Subsequently the developers and the residents played variable-payoff games, which sought to influence the council's decision. The first result was a revised project designed to be more acceptable to residents, which the council approved. Residents were not satisfied; they responded by a lawsuit which at best (for them) would stop the project, or failing that delay it. They first won a short delay, but then lost; in Spring 1986, construction of the project is almost complete.

Carey's game-theoretic analysis, it seems to me, implicitly assumes a pluralist society in which actors have roughly equal political power. Marxist analysts would deny this: they might allow that game theory provides valuable insights into the short-term details, but would argue that at the end of the day the dice were loaded. Finance capital saw a valuable commercial opportunity to extend Berkeley's central business district on to low-cost residential land, and worked skillfully to form an alliance with the city council at a time when its political composition was sympathetic to its case. Residents, as Carey's analysis shows, were divided among themselves; some were actually in favor of the revised scheme. Against this, it could be argued that different tactical behavior by the actors, especially the residents, at key junctures could have substantially affected the outcome. As in Fremont, it could not have prevented some form of redevelopment taking place; but it could have exacted very substantial concessions as to its precise form from the developers, whose chief concerns included the avoidance of delay. So the best description of the actors' position, here as elsewhere, might be tightly-constrained freedom of action.

Linda Kimball's study of Santa Cruz deals with a larger canvas: the entire history of growth-oriented municipal policies in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the decision to build a new University of California campus there, in 1961. Her argument is that down to the 1950s Santa Cruz remained an economic backwater, little affected by growth in the San Francisco Bay area just across the Los Gatos hills, and dominated by a retirement community. A business-oriented leadership secured a new charter in 1947, creating a city-manager form of government. They effectively constituted what Domhoff and others have called a

"power structure" dominated by real estate interests and working toward a growth policy. A 1955 flood triggered action, aided by Federal funds for flood control and for highways. The critical event was however the campaign to win the new campus, which was carefully orchestrated to culminate in success over the rival Almaden Valley site.

Subsequently, and logically, the City went to work on a master plan, published in 1964, which was posited on a five-fold increase in population and which proposed the development of huge new residential areas as well as provision for high-technology industries, with associated ambitious highway schemes. Unfortunately, the whole plan was posited on the rapid expansion of the university to a total of 25,000 by the year 1990, which proved to be hopelessly overoptimistic; the present (1986) total is only about one-third that. Associated with that was a serious error of judgement: that the values of the incoming faculty and students would be the same as those of the existing community, and that they would show no change. In fact, of course, the campus became radicalized in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and developed a strong anti-growth stance which soon—given faculty and student involvement—communicated itself to the policies of the city council. Today's are almost the obverse of the pro-growth policies of the early 1960s.

It is clearly very easy to identify the "growth machine" in the Santa Cruz of the 1950s; it could be found in many other communities at that time. But it seems to me that Kimball's account leaves some important questions still unanswered. One is how the "growth machine" in effect assembled a coalition around it, here as elsewhere. I would suggest that this can only be explained by the prevailing public ethos of the Eisenhower years, which was the time of the first great postwar lift-off of the American economy. To a whole generation of adults who had grown up in the Depression and had gone through the deprivations of World War II, growth conveyed a positive message; its negative side, in terms of overcrowding and environmental deterioration, was then completely unexperienced and therefore unappreciated. Therefore, though there can be no doubt that the "growth machine" constituted a quite specific and conscious movement by a particular section of capital, the reasons for its success have to be sought in a much wider and more complex web of values and preferences.

Similarly, the shift in values in the campus community in the late 1960s (as, indeed, its shift back again in the late 1970s and 1980s) has to be understood as an extremely complex reaction to a set of local, national, and international events ranging from the development of a counterculture to the war in Vietnam. Though all these developments can be (indeed, have been) explained as the

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manifestations of a crisis of capitalism, it seems to me that such an explanation is once again at a level so general as to be superficial. The interest in analysis lies in the ways in which the very particular can be related to the general, and that requires some very detailed understanding. In particular, we would need to understand why some of these strands (campus protest, for instance) first developed in California rather than elsewhere, and why they then related in the particular way they did to environmental protection movements that were, in fact, very much older in origin.

Some Reflections

Were these four planning issues then in some sense determined? Probably the Oakland one was, in the sense that the professional planners were trying to impose a plan that none of the citizens wanted; it was unnecessary, in the sense that no individuals or groups wanted it, and the only mystery is why it happened at all. The Fremont case is more complex: there was a real clash of interests (or, if you like, classes) here, and it might have gone a different way if individuals had not effectively mobilized. But here, the point at issue—though sometimes, it seems, obscured—was not whether development should take place, but what form it should take; the existing legal powers would not simply allow a stop to be put on development, and at the end of the day the question was whether it should be high-density low-value or low-density high-value. The same goes for the Berkeley case, save that here the individual residents were themselves divided and so fat bring effective pressure through the council on the developers. Put this way, it could be argued that the controversy was about the deployment of finance capital, carried on between two classes, one concerned with production of values, the other with their consumption. But this at the end of the day is a matter of language: the fact is that there were clearly-defined interests working within a framework of law that presupposed the right of landowners, within general police powers, to develop their estates.

The Santa Cruz battle was grander, in the sense of involving the future of a whole city, and involving also large shifts in values and attitudes over two decades. Here, there was even more self-evidently a closely-defined group representing a particular kind of capital, determined to take over the municipal machine to represent its class interests. The irony of the story is just how completely they failed; their chosen agent became a kind of Frankenstein monster that eventually destroyed them. But could that have been predicted as a development determined by the development of capitalist productive forces?

Perhaps so, at that stratospheric level of generality again. But it seems to me more helpful, whatever the theoretical suppositions

we bring to our analysis, to concentrate closely on the details of the case, aiming thus to understand the true interests of the actors, the degree of freedom of action and of power they convey to the game of political conflict, and the ways in which they bring these endowments to bear on the decision. Only in this way will we be able to make some kind of progress in evaluating the relevance and the usefulness of alternative theoretical frameworks of analysis. John Mollenkopf's book *The Contested City*, which starts with a broadly Marxian framework but concentrates on the richness of the resultant political adjustments among groups and individuals, seems to me a model for the kind of approach I am suggesting. The rest remains metaphysics; useful if you like that kind of thing, but not a basis for intellectual dialog.

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