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Urban politics and the study of urban poverty: Promising developments and future directions

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Abstract

The study of urban poverty is alive and well in sociology. The study of urban politics, by contrast, has stagnated. Though scholars agree that politics shapes the creation and durability of urban poverty, analytical connections between the two subfields are rarely made explicit. In this article, I make the case for a more integrated body of research. I first illustrate how urban poverty scholars implicitly discuss politics, and conversely, how urban politics scholars implicitly discuss poverty. I then highlight recent developments in the literature and propose two paths forward—by no means the *only* paths forward, but two ways to jumpstart greater conversation across both subfields. For the urban poverty literature, a focus on *organizations* can help scholars analyze political dynamics more directly. And for the urban politics literature, an emphasis on *political mechanisms* rather than overarching perspectives can disrupt the current theoretical malaise. These two moves can advance both literatures while drawing them closer together.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Studies of urban poverty and neighborhood disadvantage are thriving in sociology. A rich literature documents how residents of poor urban neighborhoods suffer from crippling evictions, predatory lending, disinvestment, aggressive policing, housing discrimination, and other forces that create and sustain “durable inequality” (Desmond, 2015; Faber, Forthcoming; Goffman, 2014; Hwang & Sampson, 2014; Sharkey, 2013). Researchers agree that political decisions and government policy affect life in poor neighborhoods as well as opportunities for upward mobility. Yet in these studies, politics is relegated to subtext; too often, citations in passing take the place of direct analytical attention.

In contrast to the vitality of the urban poverty literature, the study of urban politics has stagnated. The subfield's most notable contributions, Stone's (1989) regime theory and Logan and Molotch's (1987) growth machine theory, have proved foundational. Both perspectives depict coalitions of local politicians and business interests that maintain inequality within and across metropolitan areas. Poverty is not the core focus, but it is an implied outcome of urban

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political processes. These two paradigms have come to dominate scholarship on urban politics—so much so that few theoretical advances have been made in the last three decades.

Scholars of urban poverty rarely see their work as contributing to the urban politics literature, and conversely, scholars of urban politics rarely see their work as contributing to the urban poverty literature. Yet there are important *substantive* connections across the two subfields, even if *analytical* crossover is rare. This article makes the case for a more explicit research program at the intersection of the two literatures. I first describe how urban poverty scholars analyze political dynamics in cities, followed by a review of the urban politics canon. Then, drawing on recent research, I propose two ways to bring the literatures closer together. First, urban poverty scholars can ask how politics impacts the experience of poverty by focusing on *organizations*; an important, growing area in urban sociology investigates how organizations—and their relationship to politics—affect the production, reproduction, and amelioration of urban poverty (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013). Urban politics scholars can also consider new questions explicitly linking politics and poverty. One way to do that is to focus on *political variation* in order to move beyond the reliance on regime and growth machine theory—useful perspectives that have nevertheless impeded theoretical development. These two proposals represent analytical shifts, but they also signal a more fundamental change: a move to ask new questions about the effects of policies and political structures on urban poverty and to better understand how those effects vary across neighborhood, city, and national political contexts.

There is little doubt that political forces contribute to the emergence and experience of urban poverty. Yet a coherent research agenda, building on insights from both subfields, have remained elusive. In the discussion that follows, I outline two approaches that can reinvigorate the literature and push it forward—by no means the *only* ways forward, but starting points to build a more robust body of knowledge.

2 | POLITICS IN STUDIES OF URBAN POVERTY

In studies of urban poverty, “politics” can mean *politicking*—that is, decisions and policies about who gets what—or *governance*—that is, fields composed of organizations and administrators, operating within varying legal, political, and managerial structures, that collectively determine how citizen needs are met. In general, scholars incorporate politics into their analysis in one of two ways: either as background context that helps explain the experience of poverty or as an illustration of social organization and informal governance in poor neighborhoods.

Some urban poverty research ignores politics altogether. In Wilson’s highly influential classic *The Truly Disadvantaged* (2012 [1987]), politics takes a backseat to analyses of social and economic forces contributing to poverty—forces including, for example, spatial mismatch, social isolation, and concentration effects. In the second edition’s Afterword, Wilson admits that, if he were to write the book again, he “would...give more attention to the role of political factors in producing and aggravating” the conditions of poverty. “Indeed,” Wilson continues, “a major and justified criticism of *The Truly Disadvantaged* ...is the lack of attention given to the impact of state policies on inner city neighborhoods” (Wilson, 2012 [1987]:281).

In other instances, urban poverty scholars *do* discuss political dynamics but primarily as a backdrop to analyze other topics of more immediate interest. Take Klinenberg’s (2002) study of the 1995 Chicago heat wave. The study is principally focused on the social and spatial ecology of death in the context of disaster. Klinenberg dedicates a chapter of the book to political factors—discussing decentralized authority and accountability, insufficient city services, and social welfare policy—but only as foil to show how government failed to respond adequately to the crisis. Duneier’s (2000) study of extremely poor street vendors and the underground economy in Greenwich Village provides another example. “Sometimes,” Duneier (2000:12) writes nonchalantly, “when I wanted to understand how the local political system had shaped these blocks, I did interviews at the offices of Business Improvement Districts, politicians, and influential attorneys.” Broader political decisions affect the daily routines of vendors, but Duneier treats them as additional, supplementary background to further contextualize

the vendors' plight. And consider the setup for Goffman's (2014: xii) study of young black men "on the run" from law enforcement in Philadelphia:

This book is an on-the-ground account of the US prison boom: a close-up look at young men and women living in one poor and segregated Black community transformed by unprecedented levels of imprisonment and by the more hidden systems of policing and supervision that have accompanied them.

Goffman's study is not about the genesis of the US prison boom or the people who enforce punitive criminal justice policies. Similarly, Duneier's study is not about government regulation of the informal economy. And Klinenberg's study is not about the politics of social service delivery. Instead, each of these studies is about the *effects* of politics on life (and death) in poor urban neighborhoods. Political dynamics are important, no doubt, but serve as motivation or context rather than direct object of analysis.

Other work takes a more direct approach, analyzing politics as a fundamental feature of neighborhood social organization. Classics like Dubois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (Dubois, 1899), Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (Drake & Cayton, 1945), and Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1943) devoted significant space to discussions of the political organization of poor neighborhoods. Revisiting *The Philadelphia Negro*, Hunter (2015) uses politics as a way to engage in the structure-agency debate. Hunter argues that poor, black Philadelphians actively participated in political debates ranging from urban renewal to gentrification. Consistent participation in politics illustrates their collective agency and organization in the face of structural inequality.

Urban poverty scholars also depict politics in terms of informal neighborhood governance. Consider Venkatesh's (2002) study of poverty and gangs in a Chicago housing project. Tenant leaders organized themselves into a Local Advisory Council (LAC) and advocated on behalf of residents for "better maintenance by the [Chicago Housing Authority], timely service by sanitation and parks department staff, and more responsive law enforcement" (Venkatesh, 2002: 37). LAC members also monitored safety in the housing project and controlled how residents used public and semi-public space. Most importantly, though, the LAC helped negotiate disputes between gangs and other residents. In the absence of sufficient police protection and economic opportunities, the local gang had become an active participant in neighborhood life. But after a series of police raids and escalating violence, the LAC "deliberated, debated, and reflected on their experiences, and determined that using the gang to meet their own needs was ultimately a poor strategy" (Venkatesh, 2002: 261). The LAC acted as the neighborhood's governing body and strategically decided on a course of action.

Pattillo's (2007) study of black gentrification similarly addresses informal governance. In Chicago's North Kenwood–Oakland neighborhood, middle-class black newcomers clashed with poor black old-timers. Intra-racial class conflict was particularly acute when residents planned beautification efforts along a major thoroughfare. A committee, overwhelmingly composed of middle-class homeowners and newcomers, was concerned with poor renters who grilled food and hosted birthday parties on the boulevard's open green space—an inappropriately *private* use of the *public* space, the middle-class residents argued. These newcomers dominated the planning discussion and successfully pushed for passive flower arrangements rather than active walkways or paths, taking control from poor residents and restricting the use of space.

These urban poverty scholars would not necessarily see their work as contributing to urban politics scholarship. Yet politics nevertheless plays an important, if implicit, role in their respective analyses.

3 | POVERTY IN STUDIES OF URBAN POLITICS

Conversely, studies of urban politics rarely focus explicitly on urban poverty. But by analyzing the mechanisms of power and describing the powerful, these debates *implicitly* explain why some groups—typically, the urban poor—lack power and are subject to elite domination. The urban politics canon consists of two branches. The first branch is

generally referred to as “the community power debate.” The second branch, including regime and growth machine theories, has come to dominate contemporary studies of urban politics.

3.1 | The community power debate

During the 1950s and 1960s, two conflicting schools of thought furiously debated the roots of urban political power: pluralists and elite theorists. Pluralism, Polsby (1980: 154) writes, involves the “dispersion of power among many rather than a few participants in decision-making,” as well as “competition or conflict among political leaders” and “bargaining rather than hierarchical decision-making.” In Dahl’s (2005 [1961]) classic study of New Haven, a limited number of public officials may have had *direct* decision-making power, but *indirect* influence spread throughout New Haven. Redevelopment leaders, for example, “constantly struggled to shape their proposals to fall within what they conceived to be the limits imposed by the attitudes and interests of various elements in the [city],” including labor, business, Yale University, racial minorities, and organized voters (Dahl, 2005 [1961]:138). More recent research suggests “a diverse set of organizations” that “have a legitimate interest in an issue can get a hearing and, often, a seat at the bargaining table” (Berry, Portney, Liss, Simoncelli, & Berger, 2006: 22).

If pluralists argue many actors indirectly influence urban decision-making, elite theorists argue power, and control is concentrated in the hands of a few. Hunter’s (1953) study of Atlanta was the first to identify a “community power structure,” a city ruled by titans of industry and other business interests. The power structure, Hunter argues, includes “persons of dominance, prestige, and influence. They are, in part, the decision-makers for the total community” (Hunter, 1953: 24). Elite theorists even reevaluated Dahl’s study of New Haven, suggesting Dahl ignored the existence of a power structure in his research (Domhoff, 1978). Elite theorists, unlike pluralists, argue (a) that “community power structures” determine urban policy decisions and (b) that business interests dominate power structures.

Though pluralists and elite theorists differ on *who* governs, both agree that power can be understood by observing decisions. By contrast, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) emphasize the role of *non*-decisions—that is, understanding power as the ability to suppress challenges before they manifest. Power in this perspective involves the mobilization of bias to keep certain issues off the table. Consider Crenson’s (1971) study of air pollution policy in Gary and East Chicago. Though both cities suffered from similar levels of pollution, East Chicago enacted anti-pollution policies 13 years before Gary. The discrepancy was due to US Steel’s presence in Gary, which thwarted attempts to raise the issue by simply refusing to take a position or engage anti-pollution activists.

Scholarly interest in urban politics declined sharply following the publication of Paul Peterson’s *City Limits* (1981). Peterson’s central point is that city politics is *limited politics*. Cities are not nation-states; they are constrained by larger political and economic forces, as well as authority nested in state and federal government. Yet, with respect to the urban poor, the upshot is consistent with elite, pluralist, and non-decision theories: Residents of poor neighborhoods lack power, and the resources available to them depend on larger political and economic forces beyond their immediate communities.

3.2 | Regime and growth machine theories

Contemporary research on urban politics overwhelmingly relies on two intellectual descendants of elite theory: Stone’s (1989) regime theory and Logan and Molotch’s (1987) growth machine theory. In his study of Atlanta, Stone argues that informal arrangements between business interests and local politicians characterize a “governing coalition,” or regime. While the specific mix of participants may vary by city, “that mix is itself constrained by the accommodation of two basic institutional principles of the American political economy:” Formal government and private business (Stone, 1989: 6). Key government officials in regimes may be mayors or administrators, and the business interest may be automobile manufacturers or Coca-Cola. Regimes are “relatively stable” and play “a sustained role in making government decisions” (Stone, 1989: 3–4). Additionally, they are informal, involve cross-sector

collaboration to mobilize complementary resources, and require a feasible, shared agenda. Most importantly, governing coalitions are *productive*: They are organized so as to produce public policy rather than hoard resources for the purpose of domination.

Regime theory's approach to urban poverty is decidedly optimistic. If the issue of poverty is "framed for action in a way to become part of the regime's identifying agenda," such as framing poverty as "workforce development...as a way of responding to the global economy," then antipoverty policy is likely to become a focus in urban governance (Stone, 2001: 25). Because regime theorists see power as coming from strategic issue framing and coalition building, they see more opportunities for the urban poor to get their issues on to the city's policy agenda than other perspectives where power is defined as domination and unequal access to material resources.

Growth machine theory also points to governing coalitions, though these coalitions are linked by the ideological pursuit of urban growth (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Mollenkopf, 1983; Molotch, 1976). Proponents of this theory argue that urban politics is fundamentally oriented toward land development; the "organized effort to affect the outcome of growth distribution...is not the only function of government, but it is the key one" (Molotch, 1976: 313). The crux of political contestation is a conflict between pro-growth coalitions, who treat land as an object of exchange, and opponents, who value real estate for its use—that is, to provide essential uses for life, such as housing. Pro-growth coalitions primarily include business interests and pro-growth public officials and are assisted by syndicators, property brokers, media, universities, organized labor, and even professional sports franchises. These powerful interests structure politics to promote and enrich themselves from urban growth. As the theory's key architects argue, "For those who count, the city is a growth machine" (Logan & Molotch, 1987: 50).

Compared to regime theory, which has a stronger foothold in urban studies, growth machine theory has become a go-to citation in urban sociology (see for example Pattillo [2007] and Pacewicz [2013]). Growth machine theorists are also less optimistic about the potential for the urban poor to affect urban policy. Pro-growth coalitions are assumed to be the group in power, influencing how the city gets built. By contrast, poor residents are assumed to be without power, subject to the growth desires of pro-growth elites. These assumptions are so strong that "the omnipresence of growth promoters seems to be taken for granted, and the research question is defined as the degree to which their efforts are contested by other actors" (Logan, Whaley, & Crowder, 1997, p. 611). In short, the focus on who has power largely ignores the direct implications of power for poor neighborhoods.

4 | PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Recent developments in the literature point to the potential for stronger theoretical links between the urban politics and urban poverty subfields. Drawing on this work, I describe two analytical approaches that can advance both literatures while bringing them closer together. First, a focus on *organizations* pushes urban poverty scholars to take politics more seriously in their analyses. Second, an emphasis on political mechanisms rather than overarching perspectives pushes urban politics scholars to be more explicit about the impact of politics on poverty.

4.1 | Using organizations as a starting point for urban poverty scholarship

Urban sociologists are increasingly interested in the role of formal organizations in cities (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013). Organizations operate at the meso-level, serving as bridges between the urban poor and public agencies or politicians. Taking an organizational approach to urban poverty means understanding the relationships between organizations in a particular domain, and evaluating how those relationships affect poor communities. A number of studies have extended these general insights to explore how organizations' *political* behavior affects neighborhood inequality and the conditions of urban poverty (Levine, 2016; Marwell, 2004; McQuarrie, 2013; see also McQuarrie & Marwell, 2009). In general, organizations' place in politics plays a key role in determining the kinds of resources available to poor urban residents.

Recent research in urban sociology draws on this perspective to link analyses of politics and poverty. Consider Vargas's (2016) study of violence in Little Village, a Chicago barrio. On the west side of the neighborhood, strong nonprofit organizations with ties to local politicians afforded residents "much-needed resources to combat the violence" (p. 4), including graffiti removal services, surveillance cameras, and funding for violence prevention workers. As a "middleman," the organization also helped create social order by bridging gangs, the police, and residents—unlike the Local Advisory Council in Venkatesh's (2002) study of the Robert Taylor Homes. The situation was quite different on the east side. There, the anti-violence nonprofit lacked comparable institutional connections, putting it at a significant disadvantage when leaders lobbied for competitive government grants.

Organizations affected the relative electoral power of the east and west sides, as well. In the early 1980s, Chicago's political machine feared a growing Latino voting bloc and set their sights on gerrymandering the east side. By the time of the most recent redistricting in 2005, Little Village had been carved up significantly. Whereas residents of the west side make up the majority of the 22nd ward, residents of the east side do not constitute more than ten per cent in any of the three wards they are split between. As a result, Vargas argues, local representatives of the east side have little incentive to respond to the particular needs of Little Village residents.

Organizations also play a critical role in Stuart's (2016) analysis of policing in Skid Row, an extremely impoverished neighborhood in Los Angeles. Stuart argues that social service providers and the police share an understanding of poverty as an individual moral deficiency requiring "therapeutic" social welfare policies. This underlying belief led the police to criminalize many mundane aspects of life in the neighborhood and push the poor toward large, paternalistic social service providers. Structural interdependence between the police and social service agencies made life worse for Skid Row inhabitants, not better. To understand this process, one must examine "the role of the police within the larger 'organizational field' of poverty governance." Stuart (2016: 40) explains:

This [field] includes state welfare bureaucracies, city officials, and the municipal police department, as well as private welfare organizations and local businesses. Field-level outcomes—whether housing policies, employment policies, or in this case, policing policies—are the collective product of the interorganizational agreements made between the actors within the field.

The composition of the field, and the relationships between actors within it, helps account for the development of particular policies that affect the daily lives of poor residents.

In *Great American City*, Sampson (2012) similarly uses organizations to connect politics and poverty. One notable portion of the analysis investigates network ties between various organizational leaders in Chicago, including school officials, law enforcement, politicians, religious leaders, and directors of social service agencies. Politics "looms large" in the network, and of all domains, it is "the most embedded institutionally" (Sampson, 2012: 340). Moreover, network ties impact neighborhood conditions: Denser leadership networks are associated with lower homicide and teen birth rates at the neighborhood level, controlling for demographic factors like concentrated disadvantage and residential stability.

Organizations are a natural bridge between studies of urban politics and urban poverty. Policy has to come from somewhere. Allocation decisions have to be made by someone. And resources have to be distributed by something. Paying attention to the strategic political behavior of organizations, their positions within fields, or their network structure allows urban poverty researchers to better understand how policies come to fruition, how they are implemented, and how the urban poor are affected as a result. As such, a focus on organizations is one way—low-hanging fruit, as it were—to shift the relevant question of urban poverty scholarship and ask how policies and politics affect daily life in poor neighborhoods.

4.2 | Focusing on variation to move beyond regime and growth machine theories

Regime and growth machine theories have come to dominate the study of urban politics, leaving little room for theoretical advances (see Sapotichne, Jones, & Wolfe, 2007). The issue is that both perspectives promote *overarching*

perspectives that limit analyses of *variation*. At best, regimes can look different and pro-growth coalitions can face varying levels of resistance (Logan et al., 1997; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). Related studies, like Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom's well-cited *Place Matters* (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004 [2001]), suggest uniform effects of federal policy on poor neighborhoods.¹ According to these dominant perspectives, cities simply *are* growth machines and regimes simply *are* the vehicle for urban policymaking.

By contrast, some recent research treats political dynamics as mechanisms producing variation across time and space. Consider, again, Vargas's (2016) study of violence in Chicago. Neighborhoods' varying relationships to particular state actors, and those actors' jockeying for bureaucratic resources, create the conditions of neighborhood poverty. Vargas explains how these political relationships mediate the effects of seemingly universal policy:

Though welfare reform, the war on drugs, and other large-scale government policies certainly shape neighborhood conditions, low-income neighborhood conditions still vary considerably, and variation in the relationships among state actors may help explain why certain policies have had devastating effects on some poor neighborhoods but not others (p. 176).

"Rather than conceptualizing the role of government broadly," Vargas (2016: 176) argues further, "scholars should specify the particular relationships that produce urban poverty, violence, and other social problems."

Stuart's (2016) study of policing and extreme poverty in Los Angeles similarly focuses on varying relationships between state actors and local organizations—in particular, the varying interdependence of social service providers and the police. For Stuart, the principal variation is historical: Poverty governance structures shift over time, resulting in different modes of policing, logics of poverty policy, and ultimately, conditions of neighborhood poverty.

Urban poverty scholars also explore political variation across cities. Hyra's (2008) comparative ethnography of economic development in Harlem and Bronzeville is illustrative. "[L]ocal political landscapes," Hyra (2008: 14) argues, "greatly shape the specific outcomes of national community economic development policy." In Hyra's study, the implementation of national policies to increase jobs and redevelop public housing unfolded quite differently depending on local political context. In New York City, a decentralized political structure allowed for greater diffusion of power and more tenant activism than Chicago, where patronage and machine politics concentrated government power and stifled local activism. As a result, poor residents in Harlem benefited from more employment opportunities and experienced less displacement than poor residents in Bronzeville.

It is notable that none of these recent studies attempt to specify a particular regime or assume a particular coalition in power and then identify conditions under which resistance will be more or less successful. Instead, political processes operate as *mechanisms* structuring the conditions of urban poverty. This is an important analytical departure from regime and growth machine theories. Moreover, it illustrates how urban poverty scholarship can push the study of urban politics forward: Removing the blinders established by the existing literature allows urban politics scholars to directly connect particular mechanisms—like inter-organizational relationships or governance structures—to the varying conditions of urban poverty. It also opens up new lines of inquiry, like cross-national studies, that can additionally specify the relationship between particular political structures and unequal outcomes for the urban poor (see for example Arbaci & Malheiros, 2010; Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2016).

5 | CONCLUSION

The study of urban poverty is thriving in sociology while the study of urban politics has stagnated. Yet politics continues to shape urban poverty, even if research at the intersection of the two subfields is scant. This article has made the case for a more integrated and intellectually generative body of research. I first discussed how urban poverty scholars implicitly address politics in their analyses, and conversely, how urban politics scholars implicitly address poverty. I described recent research that suggests the potential for greater theoretical integration. In particular, I argue that a deeper focus on organizations and an emphasis on political variation can push both literatures

to consider new questions about the role of policies and politics in the growth, persistence, and experience of urban poverty.

Urban poverty scholars do not necessarily see themselves as contributing to the urban politics literature. And urban politics scholars do not necessarily think of themselves as contributing to urban poverty research. This does not have to be the case. Recent research signals promising developments that future work can build on.

There are, of course, additional paths forward. Indeed, it is my hope that sociologists explore many more ways to bring the literatures into greater conversation. The point of this article is not to circumscribe a particular research program, but rather to make the more general case for new theoretical thinking and empirical insights about an important, neglected area of research. Though *research* at the intersection of urban politics and urban poverty has stagnated, the *issues* are no less important today.

ENDNOTES

¹ While the authors do identify varying urban political regimes, they nevertheless note, "At the same time, none of these [...] approaches has made progress on reducing inequality, persistent poverty, and racial and economic segregation" (Dreier et al., 2004 [2001], p. 214)—an argument that does not attempt to explain *varying* experiences of urban poverty, like those described in Hyra (2008), Stuart (2016), and Vargas (2016).

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