

# “The City as a Growth Machine: Towards a Political Economy of Place”

*American Journal of Sociology* (1976)

Harvey Molotch

## Editors' Introduction

What is the driving ideology behind the plans and policies of most cities and regions? What stakeholder groups wield most influence in pushing city agendas? How legitimate are arguments in favor of economic growth in cities? These are the important topics New York University sociology professor Harvey Molotch addresses in this selection.

Like elitist, pluralist, and regime theorists, Molotch concludes that local politics require coalition building. Individuals and small groups at the local level have a variety of different goals. For some reducing greenhouse gas emissions, getting affordable housing built, empowering women, providing jobs for Hispanics, renewing the central business district (CBD), reducing property taxes, or getting a new convention center built will be their main concern. But acting alone individuals and small specialized interest groups can rarely muster enough votes to get local government to respond to their priorities. Accordingly coalitions form around higher-level goals. Liberal individuals and groups that favor reducing greenhouse gas emissions, getting affordable housing built, empowering women, and providing jobs for Hispanics, might band together to elect a liberal city council person who will pursue all of these goals. Similarly, conservative individuals and groups whose priorities are renewing the CBD, reducing property taxes, and getting a new convention center built might band together to elect a conservative city council person who will pursue all of their goals. Environmentalists in the liberal coalition will likely have different values than their feminist or civil rights oriented partners, but if they compromise and work together to achieve their overall liberal agenda everyone in the coalition may benefit.

Based on his examination of local politics, Molotch concluded that not all local coalitions have equal power and that at the time he wrote the article one type of coalition was overwhelmingly dominant: coalitions of organizations and individuals that believe growth is the most important local priority.

Lord Bryce – a British Ambassador to the United States in the late nineteenth century – coined the term “machine” to refer to the efficient organizations that Irish and other ethnic groups created to mobilize voters, win elections, and then distribute patronage and jobs to their constituencies. Referring back to the ethnic machine politics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Molotch terms the economic development-oriented coalitions that continue to dominate local governments growth “machines”. Unlike the earlier city political machines, their constituents are not low-income immigrants and their agendas are not distribution of jobs, social welfare benefits, and patronage. Rather, Molotch argues, growth machines consist of business leaders, civic boosters, property owners, investors in local-oriented financial institutions and their allies. Their goal is to promote economic growth in the city and region where they operate.

Members of the growth machine see the main objective of expenditure of public funds, regulation of land use, and other government action as promotion of growth. Thus, given a choice between spending local own-source property tax revenue on a women's center or a one-stop office where potential investors can learn about business opportunities in the city, members of the growth coalition would fund the one-stop office.

Members of a growth machine may have different priorities from each other. For example, executives for a large department store may want the growth machines to spend property tax revenue on a new municipal parking structure near their store, while the city's largest bank might like to see the city invest in a new park that will boost property values. A third member of the same growth coalition might want money spent to sweeten an urban renewal deal. But all members of the growth machine want to foster a good business climate that attracts or retains business.

Molotch notes that members of growth machines do not see their vision as selfish and self-serving. They believe that growth is good for everyone in the community. In their view growth will make it possible to reduce local property tax rates and will generate increased property tax revenue that can be used to improve schools, libraries, parks, and other amenities; retain jobs that might otherwise disappear and create new and better paying jobs so that city residents can find work and the city has lower unemployment and needs to spend less on social welfare; and that economic multiplier effects will help small businesses employ more staff and sell more goods and services. Molotch questions these assumptions. His research suggests that tax rates in cities where growth machines have been successful stayed about the same as before. He does not believe that there is a direct link between economic growth and jobs. New stadium projects touted as magnets to help local business, for example, often turn out to be money sinks.

Molotch's article was written in 1976, when the consensus that growth is important was more widely accepted than it is nowadays. While US cities were overwhelmingly pro-growth at the time, Molotch's prediction that anti-growth sentiment would grow has proven prescient. While there were only a few effective anti-growth coalitions at the time that Molotch wrote this selection (located mainly in university towns), growth management is now a dominant concern in many cities – particularly in affluent, liberal communities in environmentally sensitive areas. Countercoalitions that oppose growth are now powerful forces in many cities. In Europe green urbanism is an important force. And, as Timothy Beatley describes (p. 446), green urbanism – unknown to most of the world at the time the Brundtland Commission published its report in 1987 (p. 351) – is now widely incorporated into city planning. At least at a rhetorical level, as Stephen Wheeler describes (p. 458), many nations and many cities are now committed to plans and policies to reduce their carbon footprints, promote alternative energy sources, and make responsible stewardship of natural resources a priority over unquestioned growth.

Review Orfield's description of metropolitan fiscal inequities (p. 296). Wouldn't growth provide jobs and property tax revenue to the "at risk" communities that Orfield, a liberal, wants to help? Contrast Molotch's characterization of coalitions that support growth as similar to old-fashioned political machines that care little about the real interests of poor and working-class people with Michael Porter's views on the competitive advantage of the inner city (p. 282). Porter believes that helping indigenous entrepreneurs succeed is the best way to help the urban poor. Porter believes in many of the values Molotch describes as characteristic of growth machines, but argues that they can be used to help improve the lives of inner-city residents.

Harvey Molotch (b. 1940) holds a dual appointment at New York University as Professor of Sociology, and Professor of Metropolitan Studies within the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis. He received a PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago in 1968. Molotch taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from 1968 to 2003. He has been a visiting professor at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, the University of Essex, the University of Lund, Sweden, University of Washington, and Northwestern University. In 1998–1999 he was Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics. He has also been a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies at Stanford University and the Russell Sage Foundation. In addition to urban development and political economy, Molotch's research interests have included studies of race (white flight), environmental degradation (an oil spill in Santa Barbara, California), media (journalist writings as the product of social structures), mechanisms of interactional inequalities, including human conversation (what gaps in conversation reveal about human interaction), and the sociology of architecture, design, and consumption (studying the way in which social structures produce material things), colloquially "where stuff comes from" as his latest book is titled. In 2003

Molotch received a lifetime career achievement in urban and community scholarship award from the Urban and Community Studies Section of the American Sociological Association.

This selection "The City as a Growth Machine: Towards a Political Economy of Place" was published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (September, 1976), 309–332.

Molotch developed his ideas on the city as a growth machine in *Urban Fortunes*, with John Logan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987). *Urban Fortunes* won the Robert Ezra Park Award of the Urban and Community Sociology section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) as the best book of 1987 and the ASA's Distinguished Scholarly Contribution to Sociology Award in 1990.

Other books by Molotch include *Managed Integration: Dilemmas of Doing Good in the City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), and *Where Stuff Comes from: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers and Many Other Things Come to Be as They Are* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Other books on growth machines include John Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), David Wilson, *The Urban Growth Machine* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), Barbara Ferman, *Challenging the Growth Machine* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1996), and Natalie McPherson, *Machines and Economic Growth: The Implications for Growth Theory of the History of the Industrial Revolution* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1994).

Conventional definitions of "city," "urban place," or "metropolis" have led to conventional analyses of urban systems and urban-based social problems. Usually traceable to Wirth's classic and highly plausible formulation of "numbers, density and heterogeneity," there has been a continuing tendency, even in more recent formulations, e.g. to conceive of place quite apart from a crucial dimension of social structure: power and social class hierarchy. Consequently, sociological research based on the traditional definitions of what an urban place is has had very little relevance to the actual, day-to-day activities of those at the top of local power structure whose priorities set the limits within which decisions affecting land use, the public budget, and urban social life come to be made. It has not been very apparent from the scholarship of urban social science that land, the basic stuff of place, is a market commodity providing wealth and power, and that some very important people consequently take a keen interest in it. Thus, although there are extensive literatures on community power as well as on how to define and conceptualize a city or urban place, there are few notions available to link the two issues coherently, focusing on the urban settlement as a political economy.

This paper aims toward filling this need. I speculate that the political and economic essence of virtually any given locality, in the present American context, is *growth*. I further argue that the desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites,

however split they might be on other issues, and that a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among important people in a given locale – at least insofar as they have any important local goals at all. Further, this growth imperative is the most important constraint upon available options for local initiative in social and economic reform.

It is thus that I argue that the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine.

The clearest indication of success at growth is a constantly rising urban-area population – a symptom of a pattern ordinarily comprising an initial expansion of basic industries followed by an expanded labor force, a rising scale of retail and wholesale commerce, more far-flung and increasingly intensive land development, higher population density, and increased levels of financial activity. Although throughout this paper I index growth by the variable population growth, it is this entire syndrome of associated events that is meant by the general term "growth." I argue that the means of achieving this growth, of setting off this chain of phenomena, constitute the central issue for those serious people who care about their locality and who have the resources to make their caring felt as a political force. The city is, for those who count, a growth machine.

### THE HUMAN ECOLOGY: MAPS AS INTEREST MOSAICS

I have argued elsewhere that any given parcel of land represents an interest and that any given locality is thus an aggregate of land-based interests. That is, each landowner (or person who otherwise has some interest in the prospective use of a given piece of land) has in mind a certain future for that parcel which is linked somehow with his or her own well-being. If there is a simple ownership, the relationship is straightforward: to the degree to which the land's profit potential is enhanced, one's own wealth is increased. In other cases, the relationship may be more subtle: one has interest in an adjacent parcel, and if a noxious use should appear, one's own parcel may be harmed. More subtle still is the emergence of concern for an aggregate of parcels: one sees that one's future is bound to the future of a larger area, that the future enjoyment of financial benefit flowing from a given parcel will derive from the general future of the proximate aggregate of parcels. When this occurs, there is that "we feeling" which bespeaks of community. We need to see each geographical map – whether of a small group of land parcels, a whole city, a region, or a nation – not merely as a demarcation of legal, political, or topographical features, but as a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action.

Each unit of a community strives, at the expense of the others, to enhance the land-use potential of the parcels with which it is associated. Thus, for example, shopkeepers at both ends of a block may compete with one another to determine in front of which building the bus stop will be placed. Or, hotel owners on the north side of a city may compete with those on the south to get a convention center built nearby. Likewise, area units fight over highway routes, airport locations, campus developments, defense contracts, traffic lights, one-way street designations, and park developments. The intensity of group consciousness and activity waxes and wanes as opportunities for and challenges to the collective good rise and fall; but when these coalitions are of sufficiently enduring quality, they constitute identifiable, ongoing communities. Each member of a community is simultaneously the member of a number of others; hence, communities exist in a nested fashion (e.g., neighborhood within city, within region), with salience of community level varying both over time and circumstance. Because of this nested nature of communities, subunits which are competitive

with one another at one level (e.g., in an interblock dispute over where the bus stop should go) will be in coalition at a higher level (e.g., in an intercity rivalry over where the new port should go). Obviously, the anticipation of potential coalition acts to constrain the intensity of conflict at more local loci of growth competition.

Hence, to the degree to which otherwise competing land-interest groups collude to achieve a common land-enhancement scheme, there is community – whether at the level of a residential block club, a neighborhood association, a city or metropolitan chamber of commerce, a state development agency, or a regional association. Such aggregates, whether constituted formally or informally, whether governmental political institutions or voluntary associations, typically operate in the following way: an attempt is made to use government to gain those resources which will enhance the growth potential of the area unit in question. Often, the governmental level where action is needed is at least one level higher than the community from which the activism springs. Thus, individual landowners aggregate to extract neighborhood gains from the city government; a cluster of cities may coalesce to have an effective impact on the state government, etc. Each locality, in striving to make these gains, is in competition with other localities because the degree of growth, at least at any given moment, is finite. The scarcity of developmental resources means that government becomes the arena in which land-use interest groups compete for public money and attempt to mold those decisions which will determine the land-use outcomes. Localities thus compete with one another to gain the *preconditions* of growth. Historically, U.S. cities were created and sustained largely through this process; it continues to be the significant dynamic of contemporary local political economy and is critical to the allocation of public resources and the ordering of local issue agendas.

Government decisions are not the only kinds of social activities which affect local growth chances; decisions made by private corporations also have major impact. When a national corporation decides to locate a branch plant in a given locale, it sets the conditions for the surrounding land-use pattern. But even here, government decisions are involved: plant-location decisions are made with reference to such issues as labor costs, tax rates, and the costs of obtaining raw materials and transporting goods to

markets. It is government decisions (at whatever level) that help determine the cost of access to markets and raw materials. This is especially so in the present era of raw material subsidies (e.g., the mineral depletion allowance) and reliance on government approved or subsidized air transport, highways, railways, pipelines, and port developments. Government decisions influence the cost of overhead expenses (e.g., pollution abatement requirements, employee safety standards), and government decisions affect the costs of labor through indirect manipulation of unemployment rates, through the use of police to constrain or enhance union organizing, and through the legislation and administration of welfare laws.

Localities are generally mindful of these governmental powers and, in addition to creating the sorts of physical conditions which can best serve industrial growth, also attempt to maintain the kind of "business climate" that attracts industry: for example, favorable taxation, vocational training, law enforcement, and "good" labor relations. To promote growth, taxes should be "reasonable," the police force should be oriented toward protection of property, and overt social conflict should be minimized. Increased utility and government costs caused by new development should be borne (and they usually are) by the public at large, rather than by those responsible for the "excess" demand on the urban infrastructure. Virtually any issue of a major business magazine is replete with ads from localities of all types (including whole countries) trumpeting their virtues in just these terms to prospective industrial settlers. In addition, a key role of elected and appointed officials becomes that of "ambassador" to industry, to communicate, usually with appropriate ceremony, these advantages to potential investors.

I aim to make the extreme statement that this organized effort to affect the outcome of growth distribution is the essence of local government as a dynamic political force. It is not the only function of government, but it is the key one and, ironically, the one most ignored. Growth is not, in the present analysis, merely one among a number of equally important concerns of political process. Among contemporary social scientists, perhaps only Murray Edelman has provided appropriate conceptual preparation for viewing government in such terms. Edelman contrasts two kinds of politics. First there is the "symbolic" politics which comprises the "big issues" of public morality and the symbolic reforms featured in

the headlines and editorials of the daily press. The other politics is the process through which goods and services actually come to be distributed in the society. Largely unseen, and relegated to negotiations within committees (when it occurs at all within a formal government body), this is the politics which determines who, in *material terms*, gets what, where, and how. This is the kind of politics we must talk about at the local level: it is the politics of distribution, and land is the crucial (but not the only) variable in this system.

The people who participate with their energies, and particularly their fortunes, in local affairs are the sort of persons who – at least in vast disproportion to their representation in the population – have the most to gain or lose in land-use decisions. Prominent in terms of numbers have long been the local businessmen, particularly property owners and investors in locally oriented financial institutions, who *need* local government in their daily money-making routines. Also prominent are lawyers, syndicators, and realtors who need to put themselves in situations where they can be most useful to those with the land and property resources. Finally, there are those who, although not directly involved in land use, have their futures tied to growth of the metropolis as a whole. At least, when the local market becomes saturated one of the few possible avenues for business expansion is sometimes the expansion of the surrounding community itself.

This is the general outline of the coalition that actively generates the community "we feeling" (or perhaps more aptly, the "our feeling") that comes to be an influence in the politics of a given locality. It becomes manifest through a wide variety of techniques. Government funds support "boosterism" of various sorts: the Chamber of Commerce, locality-promotion ads in business journals and travel publications, city-sponsored parade floats, and stadia and other forms of support for professional sports teams carrying the locality name. The athletic teams in particular are an extraordinary mechanism for instilling a spirit of civic jingoism regarding the "progress" of the locality. A stadium filled with thousands (joined by thousands more at home before the TV) screaming for Cleveland or Baltimore (or whatever) is a scene difficult to fashion otherwise. This enthusiasm can be drawn upon, with a glossy claim of creating a "greater Cleveland," "greater Baltimore," etc., in order to gain general acceptance for local growth-oriented programs. Similarly, public school curricula, children's essay contests, soapbox derbies, spelling contests,

beauty pageants, etc., help build an ideological base for local boosterism and the acceptance of growth. My conception of the territorial bond among humans differs from those cast in terms of primordial instincts: instead, I see this bond as socially organized and sustained, at least in part, by those who have a use for it. I do not claim that there are no other sources of civic jingoism and growth enthusiasm in American communities, only that the growth-machine coalition mobilizes what is there, legitimizes and sustains it, and channels it as a political force into particular kinds of policy decisions.

The local institution which seems to take prime responsibility for the sustenance of these civic resources – the metropolitan newspaper – is also the most important example of a business which has its interest anchored in the aggregate growth of the locality. Increasingly, American cities are one-newspaper (metropolitan daily) towns (or one-newspaper-company towns), and the newspaper business seems to be one kind of enterprise for which expansion to other locales is especially difficult. . . . A paper's financial status (and that of other media to a lesser extent) tends to be wed to the size of the locality. As the metropolis expands, a larger number of ad lines can be sold on the basis of the increasing circulation base. The local newspaper thus tends to occupy a rather unique position: like many other local businesses, it has an interest in growth, but unlike most, its critical interest is not in the specific geographical pattern of that growth. That is, the crucial matter to a newspaper is not whether the additional population comes to reside on the north side or south side, or whether the money is made through a new convention center or a new olive factory. The newspaper has no axe to grind, except the one axe which holds the community elite together: growth. It is for this reason that the newspaper tends to achieve a statesman-like attitude in the community and is deferred to as something other than a special interest by the special interests. Competing interests often regard the publisher or editor as a general community leader, as an ombudsman and arbiter of internal bickering and, at times, as an enlightened third party who can restrain the short-term profiteers in the interest of more stable, long-term, and properly planned growth. [The] paper becomes the reformist influence, the "voice of the community," restraining the competing subunits, especially the small-scale, arriviste "fast-buck artists" among them. The papers are variously successful in their continuous

battle with the targeted special interests. The media attempt to attain these goals not only through the kind of coverage they develop and editorials they write but also through the kinds of candidates they support for local office. The present point is not that the papers control the politics of the city, but rather that one of the sources of their special influence is their commitment to growth per se, and growth is a goal around which all important groups can rally.

Thus it is that, although newspaper editorialists have typically been in the forefront expressing sentiment in favor of "the ecology," they tend nevertheless to support growth-inducing investments for their regions. The *New York Times* likes office towers and additional industrial installations in the city even more than it loves the environment. The *Los Angeles Times* editorializes against narrow-minded profiteering at the expense of the environment but has also favored the development of the supersonic transport because of the "jobs" it would lure to Southern California. The papers do tend to support "good planning principles" in some form because such good planning is a long-term force that makes for even more potential future growth. If the roads are not planned wide enough, their narrowness will eventually strangle the increasingly intense uses to which the land will be put. It just makes good sense to plan, and good planning for "sound growth" thus is the key "environmental policy" of the nation's local media and their statesmen allies. Such policies of "good planning" should not be confused with limited growth or conservation: they more typically represent the opposite sort of goal.

Often leaders of public or quasi-public agencies (e.g., universities, utilities) achieve a role similar to that of the newspaper publisher: they become growth "statesmen" rather than advocates for a certain type or intralocal distribution of growth. A university may require an increase in the local urban population pool to sustain its own expansion plans and, in addition, it may be induced to defer to others in the growth machine (bankers, newspapers) upon whom it depends for the favorable financial and public-opinion environment necessary for institutional enhancement.

There are certain persons, ordinarily conceived of as members of the elite, who have much less, if any, interest in local growth. Thus, for example, there are branch executives of corporations headquartered elsewhere who, although perhaps emotionally sympathetic with progrowth outlooks, work for corporations which have no vested interest in the growth of the locality

in question. Their indirect interest is perhaps in the existence of the growth ideology rather than growth itself. It is that ideology which in fact helps make them revered people in the area (social worth is often defined in terms of number of people one employs) and which provides the rationale for the kind of local governmental policies most consistent with low business operating costs. Nonetheless, this interest is not nearly as strong as the direct growth interests of developers, mortgage bankers, etc., and thus . . . there is a tendency for such executives to play a lesser local role than the parochial, homegrown businessmen whom they often replace.

Thus, because the city is a growth machine, it draws a special sort of person into its politics. These people – whether acting on their own or on behalf of the constituency which financed their rise to power – tend to be businessmen and, among businessmen, the more parochial sort. Typically, they come to politics not to save or destroy the environment, not to repress or liberate the blacks, not to eliminate civil liberties or enhance them. They may end up doing any or all of these things once they have achieved access to authority, perhaps as an inadvertent consequence of making decisions in other realms. But these types of symbolic positions are derived from the fact of having power – they are typically not the dynamics which bring people to power in the first place. Thus, people often become “involved” in government, especially in the local party structure and fund raising, for reasons of land business and related processes of resource distribution. Some are “statesmen” who think in terms of the growth of the whole community rather than that of a more narrow geographical delimitation. But they are there to wheel and deal to affect resource distribution through local government. As a result of their position, and in part to develop the symbolic issues which will enable them (in lieu of one of their opponents or colleagues) to maintain that position of power, they get interested in such things as welfare cheating, busing, street crime, and the price of meat. This interest in the symbolic issues is thus substantially an after-effect of a need for power for other purposes. This is not to say that such people don't “feel strongly” about these matters – they do sometimes. It is also the case that certain moral zealots and “concerned citizens” go into politics to right symbolic wrongs; but the money and other supports which make them viable as politicians is usually non-symbolic money.

Those who come to the forefront of local government (and those to whom they are directly responsive), therefore, are not statistically representative of the local population as a whole, nor even representative of the social classes which produce them. The issues they introduce into public discourse are not representative either. As noted by Edelman (1964), the distributive issues, the matters which bring people to power, are more or less deliberately dropped from public discourse. The issues which are allowed to be discussed and the positions which the politicians take on them derive from the world views of those who come from certain sectors of the business and professional class and the need which they have to whip up public sentiment without allowing distributive issues to become part of public discussion. It follows that any political change which succeeded in replacing the land business as the key determinant of the local political dynamic would simultaneously weaken the power of one of the more reactionary political forces in the society, thereby affecting outcomes with respect to those other symbolic issues which manage to gain so much attention. Thus, should such a change occur, there would likely be more progressive positions taken on civil liberties, and less harassment of welfare recipients, social “deviants,” and other defenseless victims.

#### **LIABILITIES OF THE GROWTH MACHINE**

Emerging trends are tending to enervate the locality growth machines. First is the increasing suspicion that in many areas, at many historical moments, growth benefits only a small proportion of local residents. Growth almost always brings with it the obvious problems of increased air and water pollution, traffic congestion, and overtaxing of natural amenities. These dysfunctions become increasingly important and visible as increased consumer income fulfills people's other needs and as the natural cleansing capacities of the environment are progressively overcome with deleterious material. While it is by no means certain that growth and increased density inevitably bring about social pathologies, growth does make such pathologies more difficult to deal with. For example, the larger the jurisdiction, the more difficult it becomes to achieve the goal of school integration without massive busing schemes. As increasing experience

with busing makes clear, small towns can more easily have interracial schools, whether fortuitously through spatial proximity or through managed programs.

In addition, the weight of research evidence is that growth often costs existing residents more money. Evidently, at various population levels, points of diminishing returns are crossed such that additional increments lead to net revenue losses. A 1970 study of Palo Alto, California, indicated that it was substantially cheaper for that city to acquire at full market value its foothill open space than to allow it to become an "addition" to the tax base. A study of Santa Barbara, California, demonstrated that additional population growth would require higher property taxes, as well as higher utility costs. Similar results on the costs of growth have been obtained in studies of Boulder, Colorado, and Ann Arbor, Michigan. Systematic analyses of government costs as a function of city size and growth have been carried out under a number of methodologies, but the use of the units of analysis most appropriate for comparison (urban areas) yields the finding that the cost is directly related both to size of place and rate of growth, at least for middle-size cities. Especially significant are per capita police costs, which virtually all studies show to be positively related to both city size and rate of growth.

Although damage to the physical environment and costs of utilities and governmental services may rise with size of settlement, "optimal" size is obviously determined by the sorts of values which are to be maximized. It may indeed be necessary to sacrifice clean air to accumulate a population base large enough to support a major opera company. But the essential point remains that growth is certainly less of a financial advantage to the taxpayer than is conventionally depicted, and that most people's values are, according to the survey evidence more consistent with small places than large. Indeed, it is rather clear that some substantial portion of the migrations to the great metropolitan areas of the last decade has been more in spite of people's values than because of them. In the recent words of Sundquist (1975):

The notion commonly expressed that Americans have "voted with their feet" in favor of the great cities is, on the basis of every available sampling, so much nonsense. . . . What is called "freedom of choice" is, in sum, freedom of employer choice or, more precisely, freedom of choice for that segment of the corporate world that operates

mobile enterprises. The real question, then, is whether freedom of corporate choice should be automatically honored by government policy at the expense of freedom of individual choice where those conflict.

Taking all the evidence together, it is certainly a rather conservative statement to make that under many circumstances growth is a liability financially and in quality of life for the majority of local residents. Under such circumstances, local growth is a transfer of quality of life and wealth from the local general public to a certain segment of the local elite. To raise the question of wisdom of growth in regard to any specific locality is hence potentially to threaten such a wealth transfer and the interests of those who profit by it.

### THE PROBLEMS OF JOBS

Perhaps the key ideological prop for the growth machine, especially in terms of sustaining support from the working-class majority, is the claim that growth "makes jobs." This claim is aggressively promulgated by developers, builders, and chambers of commerce; it becomes a part of the statesman talk of editorialists and political officials. Such people do not speak of growth as useful to profits – rather, they speak of it as necessary for making jobs. But local growth does not, of course, make jobs: it distributes jobs. The United States will see next year the construction of a certain number of new factories, office units, and highways – regardless of where they are put. Similarly, a given number of automobiles, missiles, and lampshades will be made, regardless of where they are manufactured. Thus, the number of jobs in this society, whether in the building trades or any other economic sector, will be determined by rates of investment return, federal decisions affecting the money supply, and other factors having very little to do with local decision making. All that a locality can do is to attempt to guarantee that a certain proportion of newly created jobs will be in the locality in question. Aggregate employment is thus unaffected by the outcome of this competition among localities to "make" jobs.

The labor force is essentially a single national pool; workers are mobile and generally capable of taking advantage of employment opportunities emerging at geographically distant points. As jobs develop in a fast-growing area, the unemployed will be attracted from



other areas in sufficient numbers not only to fill those developing vacancies but also to form a work-force sector that is continuously unemployed. Thus, just as local growth does not affect aggregate employment, it likely has very little long-term impact upon the local rate of unemployment. Again, the systematic evidence fails to show any advantage to growth: there is no tendency for either larger places or more rapidly growing ones to have lower unemployment rates than other kinds of urban areas. In fact, the tendency is for rapid growth to be associated with higher rates of unemployment.

This pattern of findings is vividly illustrated through inspection of relevant data on the most extreme cases of urban growth: those SMSAs which experienced the most rapid rates of population increase over the last two intercensus decades<sup>1</sup>. . . In the case of both decade comparisons, half of the urban areas had unemployment rates above the national figure for all SMSAs.

Even the 25 slowest-growing (1960–70) SMSAs failed to experience particularly high rates of unemployment. [A]lthough all were places of net migration loss less than half of the SMSAs of this group had unemployment rates above the national mean at the decade's end.

Just as striking is the comparison of growth and unemployment rates for all SMSAs in California during the 1960–66 period – a time of general boom in the state . . . [A]mong all California metropolitan areas there is no significant relationship . . . between 1960–66 growth rates and the 1966 unemployment rate. . . . [W]hile there is a wide divergence in growth rates across metropolitan areas, there is no comparable variation in the unemployment rates, all of which cluster within the relatively narrow range of 4.3–6.5 per cent. Consistent with my previous argument, I take this as evidence that the mobility of labor tends to flatten out cross-SMSA unemployment rates, regardless of widely diverging rates of locality growth. Taken together, the data indicate that local population growth is no solution to the problem of local unemployment.

It remains possible that for some reason certain specific rates of growth may be peculiarly related to lower rates of unemployment and that the measures used in this and cited studies are insensitive to these patterns. Similarly, growth in certain types of industries may be more likely than growth in others to stimulate employment without attracting migrants. It may also be possible that certain population groups, by reason of cultural milieu, are less responsive to mobility

options than others and thus provide bases for exceptions to the general argument I am advancing. The present analysis does not preclude such future findings but does assert, minimally, that the argument that growth makes jobs is contradicted by the weight of evidence that is available.

I conclude that for the average worker in a fast-growing region job security has much the same status as for a worker in a slower-growing region: there is a surplus of workers over jobs, generating continuous anxiety over unemployment and the effective depressant on wages which any lumpenproletariat of unemployed and marginally employed tends to exact. Indigenous workers likely receive little benefit from the growth machine in terms of jobs; their "native" status gives them little edge over the "foreign" migrants seeking the additional jobs which may develop. Instead, they are interchangeable parts of the labor pool, and the degree of their job insecurity is expressed in the local unemployment rate, just as is the case for the nonnative worker. Ironically, it is probably this very anxiety which often leads workers, or at least their union spokespeople, to support enthusiastically employers' preferred policies of growth. It is the case that an actual decline in local job opportunities, or economic growth not in proportion to natural increase, might induce the hardship of migration. But this price is not the same as, and is less severe than, the price of simple unemployment. It could also rather easily be compensated through a relocation subsidy for mobile workers, as is now commonly provided for high-salaried executives by private corporations and in a limited way generally by the federal tax deduction for job-related moving expenses.

Workers' anxiety and its ideological consequences emerge from the larger fact that the United States is a society of constant substantial joblessness, with unemployment rates conservatively estimated by the Department of Commerce at 4–8 per cent of that portion of the work force defined as ordinarily active. There is thus a game of musical chairs being played at all times, with workers circulating around the country, hoping to land in an empty chair at the moment the music stops. Increasing the stock of jobs in any one place neither causes the music to stop more frequently nor increases the number of chairs relative to the number of players. The only way effectively to ameliorate this circumstance is to create a full-employment economy, a comprehensive system of drastically increased unemployment insurance, or

some other device which breaks the connection between a person's having a livelihood and the remote decisions of corporate executives. Without such a development, the fear of unemployment acts to make workers politically passive (if not downright supportive) with respect to land-use policies, taxation programs, and antipollution nonenforcement schemes which, in effect, represent income transfers from the general public to various sectors of the elite. Thus, for many reasons, workers and their leaders should organize their political might more consistently not as part of the growth coalitions of the localities in which they are situated, but rather as part of national movements which aim to provide full employment, income security, and programs for taxation, land use, and the environment which benefit the vast majority of the population. They tend not to be doing this at present.

### THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL INCREASE

Localities grow in population not simply as a function of migration but also because of the fecundity of the existing population. Some means are obviously needed to provide jobs and housing to accommodate such growth – either in the immediate area or at some distant location. There are ways of handling this without compounding the environmental and budgetary problems of existing settlements. First, there are some localities which are, by many criteria, not overpopulated. Their atmospheres are clean, water supplies plentiful, and traffic congestion nonexistent. In fact, in certain places increased increments of population may spread the costs of existing road and sewer systems over a larger number of citizens or bring an increase in quality of public education by making rudimentary specialization possible. In the state of California, for example, the great bulk of the population lives on a narrow coastal belt in the southern two-thirds of the state. Thus the northern third of the state consists of a large unpopulated region rich in natural resources, including electric power and potable water. The option chosen in California, as evidenced by the state aqueduct, was to move the water from the uncrowded north to the dense, semiarid south, thus lowering the environmental qualities of both regions, and at a substantial long-term cost to the public budget. The opposite course of action was clearly an option. The point is that there are relatively underpopulated areas in this country which do not have "natural" problems

of inaccessibility, ugliness, or lack of population-support resources. Indeed, the nation's most severely depopulated areas, the towns of Appalachia, are in locales of sufficient resources and are widely regarded as aesthetically appealing; population out-migration likely decreased the aesthetic resources of both the migrants to and residents of Chicago and Detroit, while resulting in the desertion of a housing stock and utility infrastructure designed to serve a larger population. Following from my more general perspective, I see lack of population in a given area as resulting from the political economic decisions made to populate other areas instead. If the process were rendered more rational, the same investments in roads, airports, defense plants, etc., could be made to effect a very different land-use outcome. Indeed, utilization of such deliberate planning strategies is the practice in some other societies and shows some evidence of success; perhaps it could be made to work in the United States as well.

As a long-term problem, natural increase may well be phased out. American birth rates have been steadily decreasing for the last several years, and we are on the verge of a rate providing for zero population growth. If a stable population actually is achieved, a continuation of the present interlocal competitive system will result in the proliferation of ghost towns and unused capital stocks as the price paid for the growth of the successful competing units. This will be an even more clearly preposterous situation than the current one, which is given to produce ghost towns only on occasion.

### THE EMERGING COUNTERCOALITION

Although growth has been the dominant ideology in most localities in the United States, there has always been a subversive thread of resistance. Treated as romantic, or as somehow irrational, this minority long was ignored, even in the face of accumulating journalistic portrayals of the evils of bigness. But certainly it was an easy observation to make that increased size was related to high levels of pollution, traffic congestion, and other disadvantages. Similarly, it was easy enough to observe that tax rates in large places were not generally less than those in small places; although it received little attention, evidence that per capita government costs rise with population size was provided a generation ago. But few took note, though the very rich, somehow sensing these facts to

be the case, managed to reserve for themselves small, exclusive meccas of low density by tightly imposing population ceilings (e.g., Beverly Hills, Sands Point, West Palm Beach, Lake Forest).

In recent years, however, the base of the antigrowth movement has become much broader and in some localities has reached sufficient strength to achieve at least toeholds of political power. The most prominent cases seem to be certain university cities (Palo Alto, Santa Barbara, Boulder, Ann Arbor), all of which have sponsored impact studies documenting the costs of additional growth. Other localities which have imposed growth controls tend also to be places of high amenity value (e.g., Ramapo, N.Y.; Petaluma, Calif.; Boca Raton, Fla.). The antigrowth sentiment has become an important part of the politics of a few large cities (e.g., San Diego) and has been the basis of important political careers at the state level (including the governorship) in Oregon, Colorado, and Vermont. Given the objective importance of the issue and the evidence on the general costs of growth, there is nothing to prevent antigrowth coalitions from similarly gaining power elsewhere — including those areas of the country which are generally considered to possess lower levels of amenity. Nor is there any reason, based on the facts of the matter, for these coalitions not to further broaden their base to include the great majority of the working class in the localities in which they appear.

But, like all political movements which attempt to rely upon volunteer labor to supplant political powers institutionalized through a system of vested economic interest, antigrowth movements are probably more likely to succeed in those places where volunteer reform movements have a realistic constituency — a leisured and sophisticated middle class with a tradition of broad-based activism, free from an entrenched machine. At least, this appears to be an accurate profile of those places in which the antigrowth coalitions have already matured.

Systematic studies of the social make up of the antigrowth activists are only now in progress, but it seems that the emerging countercoalition is rooted in the recent environmental movements and relies on a mixture of young activists (some are veterans of the peace and civil rights movements), middle-class professionals, and workers, all of whom see their own tax rates as well as life-styles in conflict with growth. Important in leadership roles are government employees and those who work for organizations

not dependent on local expansion for profit, either directly or indirectly. In the Santa Barbara antigrowth movements, for example, much support is provided by professionals from research and electronics firms, as well as branch managers of small "high-technology" corporations. Cosmopolitan in outlook and pecuniary interest, they use the local community only as a setting for life and work, rather than as an exploitable resource. Related to this constituency are certain very wealthy people (particularly those whose wealth derives from the exploitation of nonlocal environments) who continue a tradition (with some modifications) of aristocratic conservation.

Should it occur, the changes which the death of the growth machine will bring seem clear enough with respect to land-use policy. Local governments will establish holding capacities for their regions and then legislate, directly or indirectly, to limit population to those levels. The direction of any future development will tend to be planned to minimize negative environmental impacts. The so-called natural process . . . of land development which has given American cities their present shape will end as the political and economic foundations of such processes are undermined. Perhaps most important, industrial and business land users and their representatives will lose, at least to some extent, the effectiveness of their threat to locate elsewhere should public policies endanger the profitability they desire. As the growth machine is destroyed in many places, increasingly it will be the business interests who will be forced to make do with local policies, rather than the local populations having to bow to business wishes. New options for taxation, creative land-use programs, and new forms of urban services may thus emerge as city government comes to resemble an agency which asks what it can do for its people rather than what it can do to attract more people. More specifically, a given industrial project will perhaps be evaluated in terms of its social utility — the usefulness of the product manufactured either to the locality or to the society at large. Production, merely for the sake of local expansion, will be less likely to occur. Hence, there will be some pressure to increase the use value of the country's production apparatus and for external costs of production to be borne internally.

When growth ceases to be an issue, some of the investments made in the political system to influence and enhance growth will no longer make sense, thus changing the basis upon which people get involved in government. We can expect that the local business

elites – led by land developers and other growth-coalition forces – will tend to withdraw from local politics. This vacuum may then be filled by a more representative and, likely, less reactionary activist constituency. It is noteworthy that where antigrowth forces have established beachheads of power, their programs and policies have tended to be more progressive than their predecessors' – on all issues, not just on growth. In Colorado, for example, the environmentalist who led the successful fight against the Winter Olympics also successfully sponsored abortion reform and other important progressive causes. The environmentally based Santa Barbara "Citizens Coalition" (with city government majority control) represents a fusion of the city's traditional left and counterculture with other environmental activists. The result of the no-growth influence in localities may thus be a tendency for an increasing progressiveness in local politics. To whatever degree local politics is the bedrock upon which the national political structure rests (and there is much debate here), there may follow reforms at the national level as well. Perhaps it will then become possible to utilize national institutions to effect other policies which both solidify the death of the growth machine at the local level and create national priorities consistent with the new opportunities for urban civic life. These are speculations based upon the questionable thesis that a reform-oriented, issue-based

citizens' politics can be sustained over a long period. The historical record is not consistent with this thesis; it is only emerging political trends in the most affected localities and the general irrationality of the present urban system that suggest the alternative possibility is an authentic future.

#### EDITORS' NOTE

1 SMSA stands for Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area – an outdated term used by the United States Census between 1959 and 1983 to define metropolitan areas in the United States. An SMSA consisted of one or more entire counties containing at least one city (or twin cities) having a population of 50,000 or more, plus adjacent metropolitan counties economically and socially integrated with the central city.

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