

The Strains on Progressive Cities

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I have no doubt cities should, can and will attend to the agendas of this conference. Cities have been the cauldron of innovation for millennia (Mumford, 1938).

Thus the issue for me today is not to exhort this audience to do more within and from the perspective of cities, but rather to raise some cautions and offer some thoughts on the path to solutions (and the potential dangers therein). I start by making two points.

First, it must be remembered that in the U.S. cities are largely, legally, dependent institutions. That is, they literally exist as a result of a charter from state government, and they only have the extent and degree of authority that states choose to give them. In some states this charter is expansive, but in others it is not. But regardless, in a strictly Constitutional and legal sense, cities are creatures of (created by) state governments to serve state purposes.

This suggests the cities may have (or may in the future be given) very short leashes for action. This would suggest a movement to more formally empower cities vis-a-vis state legislatures. This, however, raises a potential problem which I address below.

Second, I want to speak to the internal dynamic of cities. Cities do things, lots of things – they provide transportation, public safety, social, cultural, and education services. These services cost money. And the cost of those services tends to go up yearly, because their primary component is people – bus drivers, police, fire fighters, librarians, etc. – who in normal times expect

raises for jobs well done. Most of the money for paying for these people (and the buildings and equipment they use) comes from taxes, and the overwhelming majority of that comes from property taxes.

As the cost of providing city services increases yearly, cities have three difficult choices – 1) cut services to keep costs constant or decreasing, 2) increase taxes for those already in the city, or 3) pursue growth (often real estate, development-based growth). The easiest choice (for those cities with a choice) is number three.¹ Thirty-plus years ago a political sociologist coined this phenomenon “the city as a growth machine” (Molotch 1976, Logan and Molotch 1987). His point – cities have an internal dynamic geared toward growth, and the central politics of the city (the membership of key boards and commissions) are those with some stake in this growth machine; they are the ones who then to dominate city politics and processes.

What this means is that cities are caught in a trap not of their own making. Even to stand still (for example, socially, economically, or in terms of infrastructure maintenance) cities need more revenue. And this “more” has (for decades) been most easily achieved by buying into a growth-sprawl redevelopment-gentrification set of scenarios. More growth and gentrification means higher real estate values, which means higher property tax payments.

¹ This simplified presentation ignores the role and impact of intergovernmental transfers, and whether growth actually pays for itself.

Are there alternatives? Yes, though none of them are “perfect.” Cities in the U.S. rely more heavily on local property taxes than those in almost any other developed country. In much of western Europe, for example, local government is primarily funded through income taxes paid to the central government. Once the center collects those taxes it re-allocates funds to local areas. An advantage of this approach – it allows for more equity (less disparity) among places in service provision (e.g. the quality of education or roads). A disadvantage of this approach – it puts more control in the hands of “those damn, distant bureaucrats;” in other words, it erodes an American tradition of local control.

So two problems (strains): cities are dependent creatures of states, and only get to do what they are authorized to do, and cities must grow in order to continue providing the same set of public services they currently provide, before they even consider expanding those services.

Solutions? Here then is a paradox. To solve the “problem” of dependent cities, cities and their citizens could push for more autonomy from state legislatures. To the extent they are granted this autonomy though, their need to self manage increases, and the pressure on the growth machine increases. So a solution to one of the two problems appears to make the other one even worse. In addition, more autonomous cities mean a political economy that is more decentralized. While this may well result in more progressive city action, it is important to acknowledge that it could also result in actions that many conference attendees would find regressive.

Cities are important players on the political, social and economic scene. We live in a time when – for the first time in global history – more people live in cities than live in the countryside. While this has been true in the U.S. since the 1920s, it is now a global reality. People in cities want to do things. But there are institutional constraints on the ability of citizens and cities to act. We *can* change those constraints; we *can* reconfigure them (Clavel 1985 is an important chronicling of an earlier set of attempts at progressive city action).

As we consider exactly what to do, though, let us keep in mind that during the last half of the 20th century (and continuing into this decade) some of the strongest proponents of local control and decentralization have been from the political right. Local control, an alternative to the local property tax, small government, strong property rights are, in one instance, an agenda of the so-called property rights movement, a movement largely opposed to (what they perceive as the centralizing tendencies of) the modern environmental movement (Jacobs 1998, 2010).

For cities, a progressive future has the potential to create unusual partnerships and strange bedfellows. We can advocate for stronger and more progressive cities. As we do, however, it is important to consider the potential unintended consequences of the strategies and policy proposals that will help create the progressive city.

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