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EVERYTHING IS ALWAYS GOING TO HELL

Urban Scholars as End-Times Prophets

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For some time urban scholars in political science have been estranged from the mainstream scholarship of their discipline. In this article I offer three explanations for this phenomenon. First, in the 1960s urban scholarship became wedded to the political project of saving the cities—an ideological commitment that still colors urban research. Second, urban scholarship continues to reflect the reform traditions inherited from the Progressive Period. Third, urban scholars have been prone to excessive rhetoric when describing the urban condition. These three tendencies have combined to make the study of cities a somewhat insular enterprise.

Keywords: *urban politics; L.A. school; Chicago school; urban policy*

In 1990 or so, I chaired a panel of the Urban Politics Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA) that took an unexpected and momentous turn. As was customary in those days, Paul Peterson's book, *City Limits*, became the focus of furious attention—a curious fact considering that by then Paul's book had been in print for more than 10 years. But year by year, urban politics scholars turned up at conference panels to express their dismay that one of their own had brought classical economics into the family tent and on the basis of its premises had asserted that the "primary interest of cities [is] the maintenance and enhancement of their economic productivity" (Peterson 1981, 15). Discussions of *City Limits* often degenerated into sneering derision; Paul was roasted for being simpleminded and for advocating policies that would (in the detractors' estimations) worsen the social problems

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of cities.¹ The tone of the discussion took a similar turn at the panel I was chairing. All at once a panel member, Bryan Jones, stood up and made an impassioned speech declaring that he was through with urban politics, that he was leaving it for good because it was dominated by people who had no intellectual tolerance and who allowed their political views to get in the way of empirical research. As everyone knows, Bryan has gone on to become a giant in the fields of American politics and public policy, and in collaboration with Clarence Stone and other scholars he has made significant contributions to the literature on civic capacity and urban education.

Bryan's comments exposed a significant truth. At least since the early 1960s, urban scholars have identified so closely with the object of their analysis that scholarship, advocacy, and ideology often have become hopelessly entangled. Energized by the civil rights struggle, the Kennedy legacy, and the federal programs of the Great Society, the study of urban politics sometimes took on aspects of a born-again religion. The ideological predilections of the generation of scholars (and of their students) who emerged in that era can be easily traced in the literature of the field. Without doubt these ideological tendencies helped to account for the estrangement of urban politics from the political science profession.

Peterson focused on this estrangement in his preface to *City Limits* (1981). He argued (or noted, depending on your point of view) that local politics became a vital field of study after World War II when it gave up its preoccupations with administrative efficiency and reform and began to consider questions "central to political science as a whole. Who had power? In what sense were cities democratic? How could the public interest be secured? What were the political relationships among social classes? What was the significance of ethnic politics? Could race conflict be managed more peacefully in this century than in the last?" But soon, in Peterson's view, urban scholarship turned away from such momentous questions, with the result that "The field must struggle to gain representation on professional panels, course offerings in the area have peaked, and its attraction to graduate students has begun to wane." By abandoning the timeless questions of political philosophy, urban scholarship had become irrelevant to policymakers and dominated by "feudal barons" with narrow specialties in transportation, housing, and other policy fields, expertise in suburbia, the central city, or other restricted urban geographies, or specialties in minority politics of every stripe. The upshot was, "We no longer have students of urban politics" (Peterson 1981, ix-x).

One need not embrace Peterson's analysis to admit that urban politics has been at the periphery of the discipline for some time. But I assert that this is not because urban scholars do not engage the same questions addressed by other political scientists. Rather, the estrangement can be traced to three

reoccurring tendencies of urban scholarship: intellectual faddishness, ideological consensus, and rhetorical hyperbole. The history of urban scholarship over the past half century makes these predilections understandable, but indulging them has come at a price.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF URBAN RESEARCH: THE CASE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

My own scholarly trajectory is typical for scholars who entered the field in the 1960s. I began my graduate studies at the University of Illinois in 1965 in the heady atmosphere following the landslide election of 1964, the civil rights and antipoverty legislation, and the riots in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. The historic Democratic majorities in Congress were busy enacting the social and urban legislation that would define the Great Society. In the brief political space before the escalation in Vietnam, the task of rebuilding the cities and fighting poverty and racial inequality energized political activity in Washington and beyond. In this atmosphere, save for the community power studies and the debates over elitism and pluralism, most of the urban scholarship of the past seemed quaint and irrelevant.

It is no indictment of urban scholarship to observe that it reflected the pre-occupations of its time or to acknowledge that it attracted scholars who felt a personal commitment to the social and political changes that seemed close at hand. But the development of the field in this manner separated urban scholars from their peers in other specialties. At the same time that the study of the city became yoked to the political movements of the day, political science got caught up in the behavioral revolution. The study of urban politics went in one direction while the rest of the profession went in another.

Had it not been for the internal politics of universities, most urban scholars might have split from the discipline altogether. For a time it seemed that urban studies would evolve as a separate field, complete with separate colleges, departments, and curricula; in these settings political scientists would be able to find a comfortable home next to urban sociologists and other next of kin. Urban studies programs blossomed even at elite institutions: Beginning in 1970, for instance, I cochaired an urban studies/urban affairs program at Washington University in St. Louis that ultimately granted 32 M.A. urban affairs degrees and enrolled at its zenith 120 undergraduate majors. But at Washington University, as elsewhere, these programs proved to be short-lived. They were sacrificed to the budget stringencies of the 1970s, when the departments representing established disciplines rightly perceived that it was

in their interest to strangle these upstart programs before they intensified the competition for scarce university resources.

When the political landscape began to change, it came as a shock to the people who had built their careers by studying liberal social and urban policy. They never quite got over the betrayal. After the 1960s a scholarly industry blossomed, nurtured in the soil of alarms raised about the dire consequences that would unfold if the national government turned its back on the cities. This reaction—which I shared—is easy to understand: This was our home turf, our neighborhood, that was being so rudely abandoned.

The new turn in national policy was surely motivated by the political calculations of the Republican Party. But it is important to realize that the abandonment of the cities also was rooted in a coherent intellectual argument, one put forth in 1980 by a presidential commission appointed by a Democrat, Jimmy Carter: “It may be in the best interest of the nation to commit itself to the promotion of locationally neutral economic and social policies rather than spatially sensitive urban policies that either explicitly or inadvertently seek to preserve cities in their historical roles” (President’s Commission 1980, 66). The report of the President’s Commission was the opening salvo of what grew into a political and intellectual assault upon the most hallowed assumption underpinning urban scholarship: that federal aid to the cities was essential to the economic, social, and cultural well-being of the nation. Urban scholars regarded the issue as much more than a mere intellectual disagreement. Deeply held political and ideological commitments were at stake, which is why so much of the research of the 1980s and later seemed intent on justifying increasing levels of federal aid.

Old habits die hard. It is still common practice for books and articles in the field to call for a resumption of federal aid to the cities (I will provide no examples here, lest I be accused of singling someone out). But as Bill Barnes (2005) recently observed, “The era of federal urban policy is, like, way over.” Even in a resurgent Democratic Party—perhaps *especially* in a resurgent Democratic Party—urban policy is not going to become any significant part of the political agenda. As Barnes suggests, “For those who think the federal government should be more constructively engaged in creating and sustaining quality communities and cities, the next period should be a time—long overdue—for a basic rethinking and rebuilding of the underlying frameworks for urban policy” (p. 588). Inevitably, some of that rethinking must involve giving up some of the reflexive hostility to business and investment that has long energized urban scholars.

In addition to ideological fixations, theoretical developments also caused the field to drift farther from the discipline. A good example of this divergence can be seen in the two linguistic traditions of political economy. For

economists and rational choice theorists it meant one thing; to urban scholars it meant quite another. When the urban version of political economy segued into growth machines and then into regime politics, it became clear that urban scholars were pursuing theoretical developments unlike those found in American politics. This drift from the profession occurred despite the fact that Clarence Stone was careful to place his study of Atlanta's regime firmly within the theoretical traditions of political science. In the years leading up to the publication of his seminal book *Regime Politics* (1989) Stone placed articles describing the theoretical architecture of his work in the establishment journals of political science. Notably, *Regime Politics* received the Ralph J. Bunche Award from the APSA in 1990.

The regime concept was a powerful idea that should have brought urban politics closer to the bosom of the profession. The fact that it has not done so reflects, perhaps, the nearly impermeable boundary that has grown up between the subfields of American and urban politics. Though the theoretical logic of regimes as the confluence of public and private power has been extremely useful in understanding city politics, it has never been applied to national politics, despite the fact that corporate power and money is at the center of national elections and national policy making (somewhere, someone may have tried to transport the regime concept to the national level, but I am not familiar with it). Scholars outside the field are mostly unfamiliar with regime politics and its theoretical premises even though debates about the concept have preoccupied urban scholars for at least 15 years.

The upshot is that urban politics has continued to occupy an uncomfortable space at the margins of the discipline. Political science is the only social science discipline lacking a specialized urban journal; partially as a result, urban research is overlooked by other political scientists because most of it appears in multidisciplinary outlets. The leading urban journals rank far down the list among journals identified by political scientists as most important to their research. This circumstance may reflect badly on political science as a profession—perhaps *they* do not ask the right questions. But it ought to concern urban scholars enough to provoke a bit of soul searching.

RECEIVED WISDOMS AND INTELLECTUAL SHIBBOLETHS

Ideological fixations or their intellectual equivalents serve as a common currency among scholars in all fields. As I have noted, for some time the research agenda of urban scholarship has continued to be influenced by issues arising in the 1960s. But ideological preoccupations go back much further. Political science was born as a profession during the Progressive Era,

and it reflected the reform values of that period. Long after the influence of that era had waned in the profession generally, urban scholars continued to carry the banner of reform.

The virtually universal agreement on the evils of machine politics is what made Robert K. Merton's (1957) thesis about the "latent functions of the machine" so novel at the time it was published. Merton's revisionist interpretation provided the impetus for a long-overdue retreat from the rather simple (minded?) view that the machines were uniformly bad. (It helped, of course, that most machines had, by then, ceased to exist.) But the commitment to value-free, efficient government as the antidote to the machines did not die on the vine; instead, it lived on in the zealous pursuit of metropolitan reform. Motivated by the conviction that the dispassionate pursuit of efficiency can and must trump politics, all through the twentieth century reformers—and urban scholars—pushed for the consolidation of governments within metropolitan areas. Mostly they came up empty-handed: Between 1921 and 1979, reformers went to voters 83 times in an attempt to gain approval of city-county consolidations. They succeeded 17 times, but only 2 of those victories came in metropolitan areas of 250,000 or more (Marando 1979, 409-22).

Despite this dismal record, within the scholarly community genuine debate about the metro reform crusade has emerged very haltingly. Beginning in the 1960s, when public choice theorists offered a defense of fragmented local governance, their views were generally dismissed out of hand, and often derisively. Recently I discussed this history with one of those scholars, who said he had stopped presenting his work at certain conferences for precisely this reason.

The new regionalism has introduced some refreshing new alternatives, but at the same time it has revived key components of the metro reform agenda behind a new intellectual banner: the assertion that the governmental fragmentation exaggerates social inequalities and undermines the prosperity of urban regions. Strong evidence has been marshaled for and against each of these propositions, though at most professional conferences it would be hard to know that any disagreement exists at all. At the spring 2005 meeting of the Urban Affairs Association (for example), David Imbroscio was bold enough to challenge the level of evidence offered by New Regionalists that the problems of central cities are caused by their "isolation" from broader regional dynamics (here I am relying on conversations with three panel participants, since I missed the meeting).² According to participants, at least two scholars walked out, and no one came to David's defense. Surely urban scholars ought to be able to agree that the findings on this important point are ambiguous enough to sustain a vigorous debate (Greenstein and Wiewel 2000).

HYBERBOLE AND *NOIR*

It should be emphasized that urban politics scholars are no more prone to ideological fixations and their intellectual equivalents than are urban scholars generally. Indeed, the reform impulse may be regarded as only one variant of an understanding, long shared among students of the city, that the city is always going to hell, that the changes under way (whatever they may be) are making everything worse, and that things will become truly dire if something is not done *now or at least soon*. The love affair between urban scholars and *noir* goes back a long way. It has appeared in its most coherent version in two storylines, one told by the Chicago school in the 1920s and 1930s, the other version articulated, more recently, by the L.A. school.

In their classic work, *The City* (1925/1967), Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Roderick McKenzie, and other members of the Chicago school proposed an elegant, sweeping version of social Darwinism to explain the main dynamics of urban spatial and social structure (the first footnote of the book's introduction is to Oswald Spengler). To Burgess, the ecology of the city was directly analogous to ecological processes found in nature: "as in the plant communities successions are the products of invasion, so also in the human community the formations, segregations, and associations that appear constitute the outcome of a series of invasion. . . . The general effect . . . is to give to the developed community well-defined areas" (Burgess, in *ibid.*, 74). Cities were interpreted as constantly evolving organisms characterized by growth and decay, interdependence, competition and cooperation, health and disease.

Like nature, the human ecology of the city was red in tooth and claw. The architects of the Chicago school announced their devotion to careful scientific observation of urban life, but their studies kept returning to the same theme—the cities produced and reproduced sick subcultures at every turn. Park was convinced that social breakdown was the norm rather than the exception in industrial cities; as a result, he and his legions of graduate students took pains to document the life of hobos, prostitutes, and other flotsam and jetsam of urban life. His colorful language often seemed far removed from the social-science methodology that he emphasized. For example, Park, on the baleful effects of slums: "the slum areas that invariably grow up just on the edge of the business areas of great cities, areas of deteriorated housing, vice, and crime, are areas of social junk" (Park, in Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925/1967, 109).

The narrative power of the Chicago school can be traced to its foreboding mood of fecundity, decay, and violence: As Hans Christian Andersen's fables reveal, children, like their elders, are attracted to the tension introduced by these elements. In our own time, a similarly riveting narrative has emerged

about urban life in the twenty-first century. Like the Chicago school of the 1920s, the L.A. school's storyline derives its power from its sweeping and often dramatically bleak interpretation of urban life. ("Dramatically dismal": In Mike Davis's writings, balls of rattlesnakes wash up on the beaches of Los Angeles; there are "pentecostal earthquakes," "dead cities," and the question, "who killed L.A.?"; Davis 2002).

Michael Dear and Steve Flusty (2002a) trace the rise of the L.A. school to a gathering of nine southern California urban scholars in October 1987 at Lake Arrowhead in the San Bernardino mountains. A long weekend of superheated conversations by day and alcohol-infused partying by night yielded up the idea that Los Angeles is the paradigmatic city of the late twentieth century, the harbinger of what cities everywhere else are in the process of becoming. Two years later, Ed Soja (1989) described the thesis in these words: "Los Angeles is the place where 'it all comes together.' . . . One might call the sprawling urban region . . . a protopos, a paradigmatic place" (p. 191); he has added elsewhere that Los Angeles "insistently presents itself as one of the most informative palimpsests and paradigms of twentieth-century urban development and popular consciousness" (p. 248). What does Los Angeles reveal about the future? That the stark inequalities of the third world are being exported elsewhere, and that these are written on the urban landscape in a patchwork of prosperity and despair: "The luxury compound atop a matrix of impoverished misery, the self-contained secure community, and the fortified home can be found first in places such as Manila and São Paulo" (Dear and Flusty 2002a, 14).

The L.A. School's version of a dystopian urban future has swept through the community of scholars who study cities and become—I assert—a hegemonic interpretation.³ Consider a recent invitation to a conference on "Art and the Fragmentation of Urban Space: Gated Communities, Global Lands, and Non-Places," held November 5, 2004, at the University of San Diego. The preamble to the conference invitation reads,

The globalization of the world's economy and culture is coupled with radical fragmentation of urban spaces. Most urban centers, since the 1980s have been built in an historical and geographical vacuum, detached from the social, political, and functional context of traditional cities. New urban developments are hermetically sealed from the actual locality, and yet connected to a vast network of "non-places," conspicuous in the uncanny repetition of identical malls, theme parks and airports across the world.

The language of this conference makes its purpose clear: It is an invitation to preach a party line to the converted; it is not an invitation to inquiry. Note the overblown rhetoric: "radical fragmentation"; "geographical vacuum"; "un-

canny repetition”; “identical malls.” These kinds of rhetorical indulgences may explain why a student in one of my recent seminars began a paper with the observation that “hyperbole may have become the principal methodology of today’s urban scholarship.” Amen.

Much of the scholarly writing about globalization invokes hyperbolic excess as a rhetoric strategy on behalf of the argument that global forces are inexorably overwhelming local difference. As Michael Sorkin (1992, xiii) describes it, the “new city replaces the anomaly and delight of [local] places with a universal particular, a generic urbanism inflected only by *appliqué*.” In his account, this new city is characterized by “rising levels of manipulation and surveillance” and “new modes of segregation,” all put in the service of a “city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park” (pp. xiii-xiv). Christine Boyer (1988, 50) echoes the theme by asserting that cities are being turned into sanitized, monotonous copies of one another, “almost identical in ambiance from city to city.” Graham and Marvin (2001, 265) predict the global proliferation of fantasy cities that bundle together retailing, restaurants and bars, performance halls, cinemas and IMAX theatres, hotels, video and virtual reality centers, and other diversions into an all-consuming environment of consumption and entertainment.

Chicago, where I live, does not resemble this version of the city. Neither do most cities. It is true that cities all over the world contain globalized spaces built from a common template. Downtown fortress buildings, gated communities, tourist bubbles, and enclosed malls have popped up on virtually all urban areas; their proliferation can be cited as evidence that the L.A. school has it right. But it requires a great leap of faith to conclude that sanitized, enclosed, privatized, fortified enclaves are replacing all public spaces. Only in small cities is the Walmart phenomenon taking place, wherein a new mall, megastore, or Disneyfied environment drains the life out of the businesses and public streets of the historic city. Instead, globalized spaces have become mixed into an increasingly complex spatial urban ecology.

The exceptions help to prove the rule. Baltimore, Maryland, is emblematic of a type of redevelopment common in older industrial cities in the 1970s and 1980s. These cities were faced with a practical problem: How do you carve out a space for redevelopment in the midst of physical decay? Baltimore began by building Harbor Place, which is a virtual reservation for visitors who rarely experience the rest of a troubled city. Likewise, in Detroit, except for the twin cylindrical towers of the Renaissance Center and the nearby mall called Greektown, the city is hostile to visitors. (In both cities, hotel doormen adamantly warned me not to leave the tourist bubble.) Las Vegas is equally segmented. The Strip, with its neon lights, fake renditions of the New York skyline and ancient Egypt, and 24-hour-a-day entertainment,

provides a voyeuristic glimpse into a city that has been constructed as a facade of carnival and spectacle (Rothman and Davis 2002).

But these are exceptional cases. The physical reconstruction of urban regions and of central cities in the past 20 years has been astonishing in scale; indeed, the closest parallel is probably the building of the industrial city a century ago, when cities invested in mass transit systems, paved streets, sewer and water systems, and parks. The latest round of investment has been equally comprehensive, ranging from massive investments in transportation systems to parks and open space to facilities to promote tourism and culture. Virtually all central cities have been transformed, but nowhere are the changes as dramatic as in the cities of the industrial belt, in places such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, Minneapolis–St. Paul, and Pittsburgh. At first small spaces opened up or were secured, but in recent years the revitalization has inexorably spread.

As a result of this remarkable reconstruction, cities all over North America have become safer, more pleasant environments for local residents and visitors alike. A traveler to cities in North America, Europe, and many other places can observe that cities are becoming more, not less, accessible to the tourist *flaneur*. Urban texture has become an object of fascination and consumption: “the large city has assumed the status of exotica. Modern tourism is no longer centered on the historic monument, concert hall, or museum but on the urban scene or, more precisely, on some version of the urban scene fit for tourism” (Sassen and Roost 1999). The “scene” that local residents and visitors consume is composed of a kaleidoscope of experiences and spaces devoted to work, consumption, leisure, and entertainment (Featherstone 1994, 394-97). Local residents and visitors are not confined within barricaded spaces and enclaves in most cities of the United States or in any city in Canada or Europe. With few exceptions, such an experience greets visitors only in the most dangerous and crime-ridden cities in the world.

The public amenities of most cities have vastly improved in recent years. Tourist bubbles are ubiquitous, but the people who use them spill into downtowns and into neighborhoods because cities have become safer and more open.⁴ Urban scholars know that this is so, if they stop and reflect on their own experiences. Having attended conferences in exotic settings and walked about the streets in search of exceptional restaurants, they (we) should know that the *noir* fantasies often spun over a good wine in these restaurants should be treated with a dose of irony, if nothing else.

It is important to note that I am not arguing that the city has become more just or equitable. Clearly, in American society generally (and thus in its cities), inequalities in wealth and income have increased rapidly; homelessness has been displaced but not reduced; crime rates have gone down in

proportion to the extraordinary number of people in prison. And this is in the wealthiest nation on earth; conditions in the developing world are much worse (Davis 2004). In his article “Planet of Slums,” Mike Davis (2004) documents a truly frightening urban future in the third world, and for this piece he writes, for the most part, in a remarkably restrained style. Perhaps that is because rhetorical excess is not required; the material truly speaks for itself—which is what makes it a compelling read.

THE URBAN FUTURE REDUX

Why are fantastic tales about the Mad Max cities of the future accepted so enthusiastically and uncritically by urban scholars? Susan Fainstein (2001, 207) has proposed that poststructuralists (but, I add, urban scholars of all stripes) “assume that a golden age—or at least a better one—once existed”; in this golden age, cities promoted diversity, community, and free social interaction. Such nostalgia is necessary to sustain dire prognostications of urban life; otherwise the narrative of decline cannot work. This formula makes an appearance in Jane Jacobs’s recent book, *Dark Age Ahead* (a perfect *noir* title!), which is based on the premise that mass amnesia about a “functioning culture . . . so hard won by our forebears” may be pushing us (in North America and Europe) “headlong into a Dark Age.” She asks, “How and why can a people so totally discard a formerly vital culture that it becomes literally lost?” (Jacobs 2004, 4). Here appears the *noir* triptych: tragedy, high drama, and foreboding doom. Against such a riveting scenario, less pessimistic interpretations of the future seem like drab fare indeed.

It is not possible to write a critique of the *noir* literature without wondering if—this time, for certain, and finally—the doomsday prophets have it right. Some of them would proclaim that the future has already arrived or is soon to come to the city you live in. When the End Times arrive in all their awful fury, God knows no one will be able to say we have not been amply warned. Of course if that day comes, I will regret writing this essay (even more than I do already) and be forced to do my best impression of Rosanne Rosannadanna, “Oh well, that changes everything. Never mind!”

NOTES

1. I should point out that Paul’s book has not incited mere ideological opposition. It has also provoked a productive, complex, continuing debate over the policy options available to cities. The literature that has emerged constitutes the core of urban politics scholarship in recent years.

In addition to the regimes literature (which disputes the overly economic interpretation offered by Peterson), many scholars have demonstrated that cities have a great deal of room for maneuver in deciding their own fate and in determining alternative strategies of development.

2. Of course, it is hazardous to rely on an event based on secondhand conversation. I would not do so if it did not square so precisely with some of my own experiences.

3. I want to emphasize that not all of the writings of the L.A. school employ such rhetorical excess. The difficulty of saying anything about the L.A. school is that its membership is ambiguous, at best, and the literature that might be ascribed to it runs the gamut from careful, empirically based social science to gleefully opaque postmodernism to rhetorical inflammation. Some of it is undoubtedly playful and tongue-in-cheek; compare, for example, some sections of Michael J. Dear and Steven Flusty, *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography* (2002b). (Who can *not* like something inspired by Calvin and Hobbes?). As a result, any critique of the L.A. school runs the significant danger of seeming overly earnest or missing the point (or, worse, misunderstanding someone's inside joke). The world of urban scholarship would be much the poorer without this brilliant, complex and sometimes maddening, fun, provocative literature. It is certainly robust enough to withstand the critique I level at it in this article.

4. I have made this argument more fully in "Visitors and the Spatial Ecology of the City," in Hoffman, Fainstein, and Judd, *Cities and Visitors* (2003).

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