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## Urban geography: urban growth machine

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# **Urban Growth Machine**

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## **Keywords**

cities; competition; exchange value; governance; growth; land; local; place; politics; property; scale; social construction; sociology; urban; use value

## **Glossary**

### exchange value

The monetary return that a given piece of property generates. Adapted from Marxian economic theory.

### idealism

The principle that reality is constituted wholly or in large part through human thought or perception, rather than objective material reality. Sometimes used as a pejorative label.

### rentier

Someone who derives a monetary return from property holdings.

### thesis

A proposition put forward for further discussion and empirical consideration.

### value-free development

The doctrine that free markets should determine land use and/or that urban development is inherently a collective good.

### use value

The personal or social utilities a given piece of property generates (e.g. as a home, recreational site, etc). Adapted from Marxian economic theory.

### voluntarism

The principle that deliberate human will or action is the fundamental force constituting the social world. Sometimes used as a pejorative label.

## **Synopsis**

Urban growth machine is an influential thesis of urban politics that suggests the objective of growth unites otherwise pluralistic interests in relation to a city. The thesis is situated within a broader theory about the commodification of place, where place is understood to be socially and economically valued land. Its key premise is that coalitions of actors and organizations (i.e. growth machines), all sharing an interest in local growth and its effects on land values, compete with growth machines elsewhere for scarce mobile capital investment, while simultaneously attempting to gain the tacit support of local publics for such urban growth.

Following an introductory overview, this entry discusses the urban growth machine in two main parts. The first part sets out the key concepts underlying the growth machine thesis: use value, exchange value and place; place entrepreneurs; growth machines and their allies; competing for mobile capital; and promoting growth as a public good. The second part identifies core issues and debates in relation to the thesis (particularly those made by human geographers), including critiques of: the property focus; the human agency focus; difficulties with international comparison; the conceptualization of local dependency and scale; and the relationship of political projects with local feeling.

## **Urban Growth Machine**

Urban growth machine is an influential thesis of urban politics that suggests the objective of growth unites otherwise pluralistic interests in relation to a city. The thesis is situated within a broader theory about the commodification of place, where place is understood to be socially and economically valued land. Its key premise is that coalitions of actors and organizations (i.e. growth machines), all sharing an interest in local growth and its effects on land values, compete with growth machines elsewhere for scarce mobile capital investment, while simultaneously attempting to gain the tacit support of local publics for such urban growth.

### Overview

In the mid-1970s, three areas of writing dominated American theories of urban politics: (1) the longstanding community power debates, polarized into theories of elite power and democratic pluralism; (2) work in the Chicago School tradition of human ecology; and (3) the rising influence of Marxian political economy. For Harvey Molotch, an American sociologist, the first area represented a largely stagnant debate, overly focused on identifying the agents of political power without questioning their motivations. The latter two areas did get at some of this missing question, but were respectively overly focused on the cultural peculiarities of urban place, or the determinate nature of capital relations. Molotch sought a middle ground between all of these areas, placing a strong focus on the activities of people and institutions in shaping and contesting what he argued to be central to a specifically urban politics: land, and its political, economic and social construction as place. So

important was this politics of place, suggested Molotch, that it compelled otherwise pluralistic elites to join together in their collective interest for urban growth; they became growth machines.

This portrait of an American urban politics driven by growth machines was later elaborated by Molotch, writing with John Logan, in the 1980s as part of a more general theory about the commodification of place. Yet most writing, including that of human geographers, has largely focused on the growth machine thesis specifically. One possible reason for this is that the thesis offered a framework that, particularly for those disillusioned with abstracted theories of economy or capital, presented a new way to apprehend the agency of people and institutions in urban politics. In joining such an agency focus with an emphasis on power, the growth machine thesis made a partial, qualified return to the agency-centered 1950s elite theories of urban politics, held in check by a more specific focus on the politics of property and growth.

Subsequent sections will detail the key concepts, as well as issues and debates, connected to the growth machine thesis. However, it is worth noting here four main ways that the thesis has been received in the academy, and particularly by human geographers. First, in focusing upon disputes and action related to land property, the thesis has been seen as specifying an analytical frame for investigating a politics genuinely directed to an urban object (it has also been asserted as an authentic urban sociology). Second, the thesis has been taken as a trenchantly critical assessment of elite power in cities, and the forms, motivations and effects through which elites pursue their narrow collective objectives, even as such objectives are promoted as the wider public good. Third, the critical edge to the thesis has in turn suggested the

empirical existence of and possibility for resistance to growth machines, the most researched of which is probably the rise of the environmental movement in American cities. Finally, after some keen initial interest internationally, use of the thesis has waned, increasingly being seen as too particular to the urban situation in the United States. While this is not to suggest that it has become completely outmoded, most urban politics research has spun off towards a range of newer, and putatively more sophisticated and flexible, theories of urban politics.

### Key concepts

The term growth machine (or growth coalition) has been widely deployed in writing on urban politics, though not always with close fidelity to the conceptual apparatus or intellectual traditions on which the thesis depends. Nevertheless, the thesis rests on a set of fairly explicit and identifiable key concepts.

### *Use value, exchange value and place*

To begin with, the thesis relies fundamentally on place as a concept, and particularly how place becomes commodified. It assumes that in market societies, and especially in the United States, place is not only a basis for carrying on life but an object from which to derive wealth. Place is defined here in a quite particular way: as the outcome of social activities and constructions seeking to stake out a living, or otherwise a monetary return, from a piece of land. Therefore, there is a fundamental conflict over urban places, which the growth machine thesis operationalizes with reference to the Marxian notions of exchange value and use value. Individuals or groups seeking

exchange value hope to generate some form of rent from real estate, while for those seeking use value, the same real estate might form the basis for everyday social life. The somewhat amorphous category of residents is seen as primarily concerned with use, while political coalitions of narrower individuals and organizations – growth machines – are oriented toward exchange values.

It is important here to avoid viewing exchange value as an abstract or predetermined economic relation. Rather, the growth machine thesis posits exchange value as a product of concerted activities on the part of various actors to make money off real estate. Since land property, like labor, is not produced but something existing in finite amount, the market for land is intrinsically monopolistic. One parcel of land does not usually perfectly substitute for another. But by working to change the content of their property (e.g. by influencing zoning), and ensuring certain qualities or conditions exist in relation to it (e.g. transport, services, policing, the uses of surrounding properties), land owners commodify place and therefore enhance the possible rent they can derive from their particular slice of the property market. It is this exchange-seeking activity that designates a particular type of actor hypothesized to be at the core of place commodification: the place entrepreneur.

### ***Place entrepreneurs***

While the activities of a whole series of different individuals and groups are oriented to deriving exchange values from land, place entrepreneurs have a particularly central role in this arena. Sometimes called modern rentiers, in a loose analogy to feudal land holders, place entrepreneurs are those directly involved in the exchange of, and



collection of rents from, land. Broadly speaking, place entrepreneurs fall into one of three types. First are those that gain land holdings through inheritance or some other chance situation. These place entrepreneurs are basically passive when it comes to developing their property. They are land owners that simply collect rents or sell their property in ways characteristic of the traditional rentier. A second type of place entrepreneur is more active in the sense that their involvement in buying and selling land is conducted with some understanding of urban change and thus of possible future land uses. These place entrepreneurs rely on a variable proficiency to predict and estimate future changes in land values, so as to make a profit by strategically buying and selling real estate.

Finally are the most active and perhaps most important place entrepreneurs: structural speculators. Unlike the other land speculators described above, these land owners do not merely estimate future land values, but intervene in the wider sphere of decision-making, regulation, and investment outside of their direct control yet affecting their holdings. They seek to produce a particular set of conditions and relationships to increase the value of their property. These place entrepreneurs, often embodied by more complex organizations, make specific and targeted efforts at influencing an array of relevant decision-makers. At the same time, these modern rentiers are most likely to form the core of broader political coalitions seeking to encourage a more general objective: urban growth.

### ***Growth machines and their allies***

Perhaps the most noted aspect of the growth machine thesis – and where it intersects with some other theories of urban politics (such as urban regime theory) – is its suggestion that elite coalitions tend to have an overwhelming influence on the politics of cities. The growth machine thesis is distinct, however, by not only pinpointing particularly powerful actors and organizations, but also placing special emphasis on their common motivation for urban growth. So, while acknowledging that a plurality of interests make up political power in cities, growth is forwarded as that which binds them together: they become growth coalitions.

This collective drive for growth is situated in the broader theory discussed above about place commodification. Growth coalitions (or machines) are driven by those who: have the time and resources to participate in local politics; have particular interests in political decisions around property; and share a desire for urban growth and development. Unsurprisingly, place entrepreneurs are seen to be the core figures of such growth coalitions, along with others connected to deriving rent from property, such as property investors, developers, financiers, and so on. While this core group – sometimes collectively labeled a rentier class – are seen as central to driving urban growth in a given locality, they are nevertheless typically seen as closely associated with at least three other major affiliates.

First are local politicians, who, despite internal differences, are all seen as under tremendous pressure to fall in line with a general consensus for growth, not least for their political survival. More importantly, however, local politicians are empowered in

relation to the local government apparatus, a jurisdiction with the most significant influence on decisions related to land. Second are local media, and particularly the metropolitan newspaper, important because their preferences for growth are seen as less particularistic than many other coalition members. Newspapers are conceived as a kind of mediator, acting both publicly, by pronouncing on what is good growth, and outside of the public eye, through informal social relationships between the newspaper proprietor and coalition members. As will be noted below, newspapers are also seen to be crucial in promoting growth coalition objectives to wider urban publics. Finally are utilities, such as water or public transport agencies, which similar to local media are less particularistic about growth, often taking on a mediating role.

While the above actors are seen to form the core of the coalition, its influence is seen to often extend even further, to a wide range of allies that variably promote and support the common objective of growth. These include professional sports teams, organized labor, small retailers, corporations, universities and cultural institutions. Exactly why growth coalitions and their allies are compelled toward such collective action is explained with reference to a twin orientation: on the one hand to mobile capital, and on the other hand to urban publics.

### ***Organizing for mobile capital***

An important factor in uniting diverse interests around urban growth is the limited amount of mobile capital, and the presumed necessity of attracting such investment to the locality around which a growth coalition is oriented. In this sense, growth coalitions are essentially regarded as territorially organized collectives that see

themselves as competing with similar collectives elsewhere for mobile capital investment. Of course, this opens up the possibility that growth machines might organize around territories that are not urban (however defined), for example regions or nations. Yet as already noted, the growth machine thesis is at heart about the urban. Although cities might be argued to be amorphous, or not obviously delineated, the assumption made implicitly in the thesis is that growth machines largely organize around the jurisdictional space of local government in pursuing mobile capital.

### ***Promoting growth as a public good***

Equally important for growth coalitions is gaining the tacit support of wider urban publics. To do this, growth coalitions are said to propagate an ideology of urban growth as value-free. In other words, they de-emphasize the exchange value benefits of growth for narrower groups, and emphasize growth as an inherent collective good that will enhance the lives of regular people. Engendering public support for growth into the foreseeable future is particularly important in relation to the image that growth coalitions might be able to project to mobile investors.

Exactly how such ideologies are circulated or fostered is complex. In general however, the growth machine thesis suggests widely held local identities and civic pride are tied in various ways to urban growth as an inherent good. This potentially crosses a number of spheres, from the ways in which local history is taught in school curricula, to the boosting and supporting of local sports teams. Local newspapers are suggested to be particularly central in instilling local ideologies, since they are often

seen as casting various urban development projects as coincident with the wider good of the city or region, usually emphasizing urban pride and greatness.

### Issues and debates

Thus far, the notion of urban growth machines has been presented as a relatively coherent thesis of urban sociology, as set out especially through the work of Harvey Molotch and John Logan. However, it is a thesis that, particularly amongst geographers, has been an object of extensive discussion and critique, both of which have contributed to the remit of the thesis for studying and theorizing the political geographies of cities.

### *The property focus*

The most direct critique of the growth machine thesis is the central importance placed on land property. To begin with, concerns have been raised about the broader theory of place commodification in which the growth machine thesis is situated. Many Marxian writers have critiqued how the theory deploys a distinction between use value and exchange value solely as they relate to matters of place (or socially constructed land). Yet so-called residents, for example, can also be argued to pursue exchange values, not least because many must sell their labor. Tying people solely to their use values in the city is therefore argued as too narrowly cast, creating a romanticized image of residents battling growth machines (and vice-versa).

Others have pointed to the changing constitution of property markets, as well as new strategies for attracting mobile investment, and argued that the notion of locally tied, single-purpose, powerful place entrepreneurs is increasingly problematic. The property industries have become more and more complex; there has been a rise of international property firms, and property investments are used by non-real estate organizations to spread risks. At the same time, contemporary strategies of local authorities or partnerships (for example) towards mobile investors tend to go well beyond concerns of property development alone, focusing on matters such as regional research and training, quality of life, and increasingly the elusive notion of creativity.

The broadest critique around the property focus, however, is simply that it leaves too many other forms of urban politics out of the picture. One glaring omission, considering its longstanding debate in European literature on urban politics, is the politics surrounding the collective consumption of various welfare services, contested particularly through urban social movements. In addition to this, there have been arguments made for other potentially urban political concerns – for example citizenship, gender, ethnicity, security and more – that, even if sometimes connected to property development, are hardly reducible to such matters.

### ***The human agency focus***

Another area of scrutiny is the deliberate focus the growth machine thesis places on human agency – the activities and social constructions of individuals and groups – which writers, particular from Marxian or structuralist traditions, have accused of both voluntarism and idealism. The principle target for such critiques is the emphasis the

growth machine thesis places on how property entrepreneurs and others take action, organize, dream, and desire in relation to cities, or urban places. Many have seen this approach as theoretically deficient, developing its theses based on the so-called level of appearances: what actors are empirically seen to do. For those writing from a structuralist standpoint, as important as what human actors do are the social relations that give rise to such forms of action in the first place. Without a theorization of such social relations, it is argued, the growth machine thesis paints a portrait of particular elites with an improbable scope of power in local politics.

In addition to accusations that the growth machine thesis is poorly theorized, others have also suggested its assertion of human agency is not backed by a particularly clear methodology. It has been pointed out that, firstly, the original thesis was based not on original research but a synthesis of many previous studies, often with contrasting agendas. How these studies were assembled to construct the thesis is unclear, and moreover, given the reliance on past studies, some argue that the thesis might primarily point to a somewhat outmoded empirical situation. Secondly, others have observed that subsequent research building on the growth machine thesis has most often avoided the direct study of coalitions, instead conducting case studies on the relationships between, for example, development projects or urban policy strategies and growth coalitions. Therefore, the complex sets of agency supposedly making up growth coalitions remain in empirical practice a largely unexamined, independent variable.

### *Difficulties in international application*

Questions around the agency focus in the growth machine thesis – made on both methodological and theoretical grounds – have also been used to suggest that the thesis is poorly contextualized, leading to problems in international application and comparison. While the progenitors of the growth machine thesis strongly emphasized its relevance to the urban situation in the United States first and foremost, they and others have often hinted at its possible use in other contexts with private property markets. Indeed, there has been no shortage of attempts to deploy the thesis, or to debate and critique its application, in non-American contexts, including cities in Australia, Britain, Canada, China, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands.

The international setting in which the growth machine thesis has been most frequently applied, and certainly most debated, has been cities in Britain. Into the late 1980s, Britain had seen almost a decade of market-led reform brought on by successive Conservative governments. As part of such reform, new area-based economic development agencies, public-private partnerships, and restructured local government all increasingly engaged in various property-led urban programs. In hindsight, it is likely such unprecedented change served as a major impetus for many British urban scholars to embrace American urban political economy, such as the growth machine thesis, as a highly salient heuristic device for understanding what was happening on the ground. Quickly following a spate of early studies, however, were critiques of attempts to use such imported theories to understand British urban politics. Only at a metaphorical or relatively superficial level, many argued, could things like rising



business involvement in urban governance be labeled as growth machines. The most forcefully put reason for this was that the rising private sector involvement in local British politics arose less from local business activism, but largely through explicit central government policy.

The debates around the relevance of the growth machine thesis in Britain and elsewhere have somewhat ironically led to a clearer identification of several peculiarities of American cities. These include: a strong private sector – and correspondingly weak state – presence in property acquisition, development, ownership, and servicing; a relatively regionalized banking and finance industry (if less and less the case from the mid-1990s onwards); relatively autonomous local government, particularly in property regulation; the tradition of business involvement in local politics, often directly as politicians; the importance of private financial contributions to local election campaigns, especially for mayors; and the low (or nonexistent) profile of social-democratic or labor parties in most cities. Thus, to the extent that such features are accepted for American cities, the notion of growth machines is more plausible, at least empirically (if not as a thesis). At the same time, they increasingly have been seen as key limitations in using the language of growth machines in international studies.

### ***Scale and local dependency***

Although the central deployment of place might seem the most obvious concept in the growth machine thesis where geographers would focus critique, for the most part, attention has instead been directed towards the thesis' conceptualizations of local

dependency and scale. Outlined earlier were critiques of both the focus on land property and human agency, and how both are sometimes argued as overly empirical and thus under-theorized. Refracted through a geographical lens, these foci have also been critiqued as painting a simplistic and *a priori* picture of local dependence, whereby a more or less specific range of actors and institutions – basically those associated with the rentier class and local government – are assumed to be dependent on a locality and its growth. For some, this has been seen as lacking a sophisticated theorization of the contingent and relative spatial mobilities and immobilities of different actors and institutions. While relative immobility might sometimes form the basis for coalitions around specifically local political concerns, such collective action may unfold around a range of issues, and is unlikely to always be directed to urban growth.

If some have suggested the growth machine thesis poorly theorizes the crossroads between local dependency and political coalitions, others have suggested it also neglects the multi-scalar nature of urban governance, and particularly the effects of heteronomous forces, actors or organizations. Critiques here have ranged from simply pointing out that regional, national and sometimes supranational activities all have a hand in urban politics, to more theoretically dense arguments about the contingent and strategic deployment of scalar constructions in political projects of various origins. This wider body of writing would suggest that growth machines are about a politics at certain scales, when by contrast what is most important is the politics of scale.

Arguments around local dependency and scale, rather than place, are less surprising when one considers that it has primarily been urban and political geographers

problematizing the growth machine thesis. Above all else, such writers have critiqued the assertion that the thesis frames a specifically urban politics and sociology. As many have argued, simply focusing on those particular actors seen empirically as operating at the so-called urban scale or level does not produce a convincing theory of how the spatialities of political action relates specifically to cities.

### *Urban political projects and local feeling*

A final area of debate is perhaps the most long-lasting (if in some respects latent) aspect of the growth machine thesis: that organized political projects for growth in some way manipulate or influence more widely-held feelings of local attachment. It is important to underscore here that early writing around the growth machine thesis did not necessarily imply that the elite propagation of local feelings (or so-called ideologies) is completely seamless or always effective vis-à-vis urban publics. Rather, elites are characterized as at best partially conscious that they are manipulating local pride to promote their particular agenda, and urban publics are seen as often skeptical of city boosterism. Nevertheless, the tendency of most subsequent studies to simplistically portray the connections between elite political projects and wider local feeling has led to two major criticisms.

First, it has been pointed out that there tends to be little distinction made between organized, strategic urban or territorial projects and the messier, more distributed sentiments, feelings, memories and discourses related to a locality. This distinction is important since, while the former indicates points of consensus that may be relatively attainable for narrow elite groups, the latter concerns a much more complex and

uncertain political field that is not so easily made coherent. Second, research into the connections between the political projects of growth coalitions, and the more widely held sentiments or feelings of urban publics, has been noted for its distinct one-sidedness. Largely, a focus has been placed on elite strategies or representations, with an unstated assumption that such political projects are in some way effective or hegemonic in relation to urban public life. By directing most empirical attention to studies of elite behavior, discourses or representations, the supposed subjectification of urban publics through such projects has more often been a matter of theorization, or even just speculation.

Most research in this area has been via studies of discourse and representation, in a somewhat belated and selective incorporation of early 1990s work in new cultural geography. Although the use of these methods seems to have diminished more recently, similar questions about the link between elite power and wider urban publics continue to be broached, if now through the lens of various new approaches or theories, such as those related to governmentality, social practices, and even emotion and affect. In pointing early on to such questions in a unique – if limited – way, the growth machine thesis can be viewed (at least) as a harbinger of still-enduring concerns for contemporary studies of urban politics.

## Further reading

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### **Suggested cross-references to other articles in Encyclopedia**

- MS 199 (Local Development, Politics of)
- MS 286 (Human Geography and Sociology / Social Theory)
- MS 603 (Cox, K)
- MS 796 (Politics of Place)
- MS 1044 (City Marketing)
- MS 1059 (Land Rent Theory)
- MS 1064 (Neighbourhood Change)
- MS 1065 (Neighbourhoods / Community)
- MS 1074 (Property Market)
- MS 1075 (Regime Theory)
- MS 1088 (Urban Entrepreneurialism)
- MS 1089 (Urban Governance)
- MS 1098 (Urban Policy)