

In attempting to use theories of urban growth and decline to inform contemporary planning practice, it is important to consider the role of the state and the nature of conflict that is posited by these theories. Some practitioners consider planning to be the management mechanism of the rational state that duly weighs options and acts on behalf of the public interest. Others consider planning a form of mediation between conflicting interests, an honest broker for discussion and consensus building. Knowing which of these approaches to apply to a particular planning question should be grounded in an understanding of history and forces that shape cities, with conflict being one of the critical forces. William Cronon, Bob Fogelson, Gareth Jones, and David Harvey offer theory and empirical evidence about the growth of Chicago, New York, London, and Paris, respectively. Taken together, these three writers paint a complex picture of urban history in terms of the presence and nature of conflict and the relationship of the state to various competing private interests. I would argue that this contentious image of the city creates a de facto role for planning as mediation, yet there is a normative need for planning as a rational voice for the “public interest.” This paper does not intend to resolve this fundamental question of planning practice; it does, however, seek to inform the question with greater historical and theoretical detail.

The Nature of Conflict

Conflict amongst differing factions is one of the main driving forces in all of the texts, though the nature and nuance of that conflict is shaped by the particular author’s analytical framework. William Cronon, an ecological geographer, and Bob Fogelson, a social historian, offer accounts of conflict that for the most part leave out the working class and non-elites. They

describe the forces of capitalism/“second nature” that shaped the emergence and growth of Chicago and New York, noting that these processes are in no ways organic. They show that the areas that receive investment and infrastructure are deliberate outcomes of contentious disputes *amongst* elites. Cronon’s story focuses on both inter-city competition, as well as the detailed jockeying between actors along the supply chain from farmers to grain operators to brokers. The lack of inter-class conflict in his narrative is in part because of its explicit focus on the supply side during pre-industrial times and perhaps in part because he does not give a great deal of consideration to the conflictual nature of the displacement of First Peoples from the Chicago area. Fogelson similarly focuses on elite conflict, most likely because he would claim that those were the empowered, effectual actors at the period of time and in the places that he studied.

In contrast, Harvey and Jones theorize a Marxian inter-class conflict with fewer intra-class divisions. In Jones’ piece, elite/capitalists interests act in a unified manner, motivated by a Victorian era morality and fear of the underclass. (Indeed the role of that morality and cultural ideology is more present in Jones than in any of the other texts.) Conflict plays out spatially across London as the city is reshaped by capitalist interests in railroad, warehouse, and dock development and the lower class residents are largely displaced. While Harvey does consider exceptional individual elite actors such as Baron Haussmann and does note the tension between different capitalists interests of the Rothschilds and the Pereires, his arguments rely predominantly on structural critiques of capitalism. Powerful individual actors are simply “riding the tides” of structural capitalism, some more successfully than others. Examples of the 1848 revolution, the Paris Commune, and the artistic critiques of Daumier offer concrete evidence of class-based ferment. In comparing the deep-seated structural conflict in Harvey to

the ever-shifting alliances of individuals present in Fogelson, we are presented with two different extremes of the nature of conflict.

Winners and Losers

All of the conflicts that the authors describe produce “winners” and “losers.” According to Cronon and Fogelson, inter and intra-urban disputes amongst elites can account for both cities’ relative position in the national and global arena as well as the spatial configuration of infrastructure and amenities within these cities. Indeed, Cronon writes about the social construction of natural advantage through boosterism. He states that the quest for western dominance in the United States was being won by Chicago and lost by St. Louis, despite each city having significant “natural” advantage in terms of water trade routes. The difference in outcomes is attributable to multiple factors, not the least of which was the active boosterism of Chicago’s elites who successfully out-competed St. Louis for eastern investment and markets. His evidence of the geography of debt makes this point compellingly clear, wherein Chicago supports and is supported by a much wider hinterland than that of St. Louis. Within the city, there are winners who made investments in railroads and relative losers who continued to push for canal-based shipping even after rail had been established. For the most part, though, Cronon focuses at the broader, inter-urban scale.

Fogelson brings a focus to the competing interests within cities, with the greatest amount of detail on the case of New York City. He makes plain the social construction of the CBD through the jockeying of downtown business interests around the construction of subways and skyscrapers. Winners and losers in his story varied from neighborhood to neighborhood and block to block depending on the relationship of the real estate to the proposed transportation or building development. For example: specific losers include property owners on streets below

elevated train sites, winners include property owners in proximity to new subway stops (not counting the interim construction period where they may be “temporary losers”). The level of specificity in the work allows us to understand the complex and shifting nature of strange alliances that can form even within one city around one particular infrastructure or development question, and that these alliances do not form neatly around class or geographic boundaries. He also shows that a winner at one moment in time can quickly change into a losers depending upon changing conditions.

Conversely, Harvey and Jones conjecture a clear set of winners (capitalists) and losers (laborers) that are divided as a function of class. Harvey describes the entire city of Paris as being spatially and financially reconstructed to serve the interests of the capitalist ruling class and the imperial state working hand-in-hand. So financiers, state-preferred builder/contractors, and real estate speculators are some of the clearest winners, while debtors and displaced peoples are just a few of the many losers. In a way, he seems to make the tacit argument that the entire city loses through this inequitable form of redevelopment that led to “increasing displacement and segregation, longer journeys to work, and rising rents and overcrowding” (140). The discussion seems more nuanced in Jones as he notes that only some segments of the population are displaced, while others necessarily can remain in central city enclaves. Further, Jones’ greater emphasis on culture takes some comfort in the adaptive and supportive function of lower class culture in dealing with such overwhelming challenges. He also notes that some of the lower class are beneficiaries of the state and civil society social programs, however superficially palliative they may be. Still, the position of neither the displaced peoples nor the lower class groups who remain in the city is an enviable one.

The Role of the State

Given all of the conflicting private interests shaping society, what is the role of the state?

The presence of the state in these models ranges from almost nonexistent in Cronon to fundamentally intertwined with the functioning of capitalism in Harvey. In Cronon, the only institution that approaches some of the functions of a state in terms of mediation and quality regulation is the Board of Trade. However this is a voluntary association that serves its members, rather than a truly public entity that must serve everyone. Perhaps Cronon's weak state is because this time of explosive growth produced so many "winners" within Chicago via the market that a powerful state was simply not needed. The state has a greater presence in Fogelson as both a regulator and a financier of projects, particularly infrastructure. In his discussion of the New York City zoning codes of 1916, we see the way in which the state can exercise some rational ordering over elite priorities, at least at the coarse citywide level. However, the power of the state is always kept in check by elite interests, in particular due to the fear of municipal ownership that prevents more coordinated, expedient, and just development of public transit.

Jones' analysis of the state is next in the spectrum; the state has a stronger presence than in Fogelson or Cronon, though not necessarily a favorable one. While the government in London certainly facilitated the displacement of thousands by promoting the private development of railroads through the heart of the city, it also searches for "palliatives" of the urban ills. The state gets involved in small scale provision of public housing (including model dwellings) and by passing sanitary legislation; though Jones seems to suggest that these steps are truly a misdiagnosis of the urban ill. Rather than taking a merely physical approach of tinkering with the built environment, the state would better serve the working class through comprehensive social programs, a different tax structure, and greater redistribution of wealth.

In Harvey's model, the role of the state is even more clearly to serve as an agent for capitalism, greasing the wheels of the system and suppressing inter-class conflict. He offers great detail on the way in which private development of railroad infrastructure, with Paris positioned at the hub, is a critical component of France's imperial project. The financing of the railroads and the redevelopment of Paris according to the Hausmann plan is a joint project of the state and wealthy capitalist banking families. Furthermore, class conflict (and therefore system change) is suppressed through the surveillance of the police state. This final point serves to explain why there is less overt conflict and more implicit tension driving Harvey's critique.

Given the universal existence of conflict (be it inter/intra class or inter/intra city), it appears that there is a strong case for planning as mediation amongst competing interests. The challenge with mediation, however, is in representation of dis-empowered stakeholders who may not already have an organized voice. If one mediates solely between powerful elite interest, how are equitable, socially just outcomes to be guaranteed? Another challenge lies in the need for mediation to be led by a "neutral facilitator." The authors make plain that the state is in no way neutral towards the actors in class conflict. Perhaps it is then worth thinking of mediation more conceptually than physically. All decisions do not necessarily require a real negotiation table, but they do require the planner to consider all of the competing interests, attempt to weigh amongst them, and make a professional judgment. The question of how to serve the broader public interest remains, and clearly there is no pat answer to that question. The empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks best serve as guideposts towards more equitable action by noting the potential pitfalls, likely alliances, and patterns of conflict to which a planner must pay great attention.