

**Political parties and the city: some thoughts on the low profile of  
partisan organisations and mobilisation in urban political theory**

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the strange absence of political parties in urban political theory. After setting out the problem, the paper proceeds through a set of hypotheses as to why parties are such elusive characters on the urban studies stage. These concern, in turn: the characteristics of the literature on parties; the treatment of 'change' as a theme in human geography and urban studies; the effects of the dominance of the United States in the theoretical literature on urban politics; the characterisation of political 'actors' in this literature; and related issues surrounding the challenges parties pose to research at a normative-democratic level. In the process it suggests cautiously reinserting parties as forming part of an array of urban collective forms repaying attention in accounting for urban political transformation and, of course, inertia. It also emphasises the usefulness of parties as a space within which to think through problems of agency and democracy in the city and beyond.

**Introduction: cities with and without parties**

The scarcity of theoretical literature on political parties - as opposed to social movements, business coalitions and other actors - in cities is puzzling. Although in different contexts, parties have a variety of forms, degrees of organisational or ideological coherence, and are differentiated in terms of structure, strategy, goals and membership, they do permeate, however incompletely, many pre-reflective conceptions of what contemporary 'politics' is about. Other forms of political engagement often achieve definition and value in relation to an explicit or implicit baseline defined by everyday partisan politics. Some scepticism and reflection about ideology are necessary when faced both with the idea of 'everyday life' and suspicions about the effects of the media on 'everyday' political consciousness. Yet the disjuncture between reading or listening to the news every morning, saturated with party talk and party people, and many analyses of the political world, not just in urban studies but in political geography more widely, where these tend to vanish in favour of other objects of inquiry, is at least thought-provoking.

Partisan politics certainly has a *presence* in the literature on urban politics. In rendering accounts of political change in particular urban contexts, references to the partisanship of particular political actors, such as mayors, or the changing fortunes or ideological complexions of city parties is unavoidable. In general, most case studies of urban politics make reference to parties, their characteristics and electoral fortunes as a matter of comprehensibility. However, when it comes to *theorising* politics in cities, parties and partisanship have tended to fade from view and partisan activity becomes something like a foreground to concerns with other more theoretically-amenable objects and actors. A brief, but uncontroversial listing of the various theoretical frameworks commonly treated in urban politics courses might include elitism, pluralism, neo-elitism, Marxian political economy, structural Marxism, regulation theory, growth machine theory, regime theory and various approaches to urban governance. Of these, only pluralism, and then to some degree, especially after Dahl, makes clear analytical space for parties and partisanship. Judge et al. (1995), in their very useful collection summarising and developing key themes in urban-political theory have a range of chapters on substantive topics as well as approaches, but none of these foregrounds party politics in a straightforward way.

The absence of parties is an interesting puzzle at the level of theory. To suggest that this absence raises wider problems than an oversight in urban studies, it should be quickly said that parties do not seem to be fundamental to *any* variety of social theory or political philosophy. Where they form the focus of political theory, as in certain public choice accounts of democracy, they are treated as a variant of a more general model of rational actor, rather than a specific and differentiated element of a structured social world. If tradition counts in some sense, then, it could be inferred that there is probably a good reason parties are not central figures in theorising politics. One of the peculiarities of the social theory of Max Weber, however, hardly a marginal figure especially in American sociology, is what could be characterised as an elevation of ‘party’ to a position of prominence we can scarcely credit today. In both Gerth and Mills’ (1948) influential compilation and in *Economy and Society* (Weber 1978a) party is enshrined *alongside* class and status as one of three basic forms of socio-political existence. Most readers no doubt filter this out, and indeed Weber’s understandings of class and status have had far more widespread exposure and discussion. Weber’s self-confessed obsession with the political scene<sup>1</sup>, it could be said, led to this odd eruption of a marginal entity into fundamental social theorising. Like his discussion of the piano (Weber 1978b), it could be read as interesting but hardly key to how his basic approach should be characterised, or taken forward in developing better social theory.

Weber’s discussion is of two-fold importance. ‘Party’ is viewed as a basic social form and, partly because of his reading of Bryce (1995) and Ostrogorski (1902), partly because of his travels in the United States in 1904, developed in relation to the city. Weber’s sociology of the city usually comes up in urban studies in connection with the supercession of the urban as a key political space (e.g. Saunders 1984). But here there is a connection made between modernity, politics and urban life that seems equally important, and which is significantly different from the more ‘phenomenological’ sociologies of ‘city life’ that were to become identified with modernist sociology. Weber’s views are at best normatively ambiguous regarding democratization and the rise of working-class political mobilisation in particular. Nonetheless, he is interesting in that, unlike most

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The political’, he said, was his ‘secret love’ (cited in Lassman and Speirs 1994, x).

political theory hitherto<sup>2</sup> (including the ‘founding fathers’ and Tocqueville in the U.S. sphere), and unlike Bryce and Ostrogorski, his articulation of party and modernity is not hostile to, or even simply resigned to, party politics as such. Weber’s focus on party democracy, which runs throughout *Economy and Society* as well as his mostly more occasional political writings, could be related to his claim that different positions of value are irreconcilable and (rationally) un-groundable in modernity. Parties then might be in a sense constitutive of modern democracy because of this loss of religious or philosophical capacity to ground politics in unitary, shared normative world-views. Partisans, and partisan organisations, taking sides in a field of conflicting positions, would be central to democracy and modernity.

Weber’s conceptualisation of party is much broader than that in most contemporary political science. It concerns any coordinated action to gain power in organizations, including, but not restricted to the state. It is this coordinated action that sets it apart from class and status. This definition, then, would encompass quite a wide array of collective action, including some of what falls under the heading of ‘social movements’ today. Moreover, it does not locate ‘party’ on one side or the other of any dividing line representing the boundaries of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ politics. There is an apparatus of types of social action underlying much of his analysis, which cannot be dealt with here. But this refusal to discriminate between parties and movements seems a more interesting and potentially fruitful starting point than the separation characteristic in much contemporary literature. Weber’s analysis also refuses to treat ‘party’ and hence much of politics, as somehow separate from, or on a different analytical level, from economic or social life.

Revisiting Weber helps situate urban theory in a broader field of the neglect of party politics in theorising contemporary social life. This discussion has been necessarily

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<sup>2</sup> Lenin, Gramsci, and Lukács (indebted to Weber for some of the peculiarities of his Marxian political analysis) are particularly prominent examples of the other main centralisation of party in social theory, namely that associated with revolutionary communism. They form part of an early twentieth century field of analysis that has, because of the development of one-party states in the USSR shortly after (and eventually elsewhere), not received the broad objective attention it warrants. The declining salience of communist and other parties as objects of analysis, in cities and at other scales, in several key European centres of production of urban theory, has been an important element in the general problem posed here. The emphasis on urban social movements in European literatures as well as the submergence of the party political ‘scene’ (see below) in broader political-economy frameworks has also been conditioned by this.

brief: the reception of Weber's work, and the reasons why 'party' has not filtered into subsequent 'grand' social theory, or its urban applications, cannot be adequately explored here, although characteristic critical contrasting with Marx and Durkheim on, say, class and the state (and hence a focus on these concepts in Weber's work), may form part of the picture. Parties do not matter centrally because Weber said so, but in a social science world where the various approaches are populated with key objects taken from one or other major social theory, that he said so does suggest an interesting entry point to some more specific problems. Moreover, Weber's work furnishes the idea that partisanship and its organisational bases are in some way central to understanding modern urban life. The by contrast rather ghostly presence of these themes in most contemporary urban theory suggests the topic deserves some further exploration.

Questions about the absence of party in theory should ultimately matter most because of their implications for the understanding of political practices in cities and elsewhere. And, parties seem to be, on reflection, important in structuring politics in most cities, and in relating what happens in urban politics to politics elsewhere. Yet like the support staff in some large organisation, they are often passed over in deciding what to say about what drives realities on the ground. Their personnel carry out various tasks. They make elections happen, which are, even in times of low turnout in many contexts the largest of all participatory political institutions. They fill seats and posts in councils and other state institutions. They mediate relationships between cities and the broader political scene (in this sense sometimes exerting transformational pressure on this broader picture), and in many instances they articulate city programmes and the normative sense of what urban policy is about. Yet urban studies tends to focus on party politicians only insofar as they are important in accounting for the shape taken by particular urban policies or projects, or insofar as they are embodied in changing urban political institutions of particular current interest – such as executive mayors.

A few examples should suggest that there is something problematic with this apparent neglect. The development of new governance structures in London in the last decade is incomprehensible outside a frame where transformations in both the Labour party and the Conservative party at local and national levels since the 1960s are given their full weight alongside other interests (Newman and Thornley 1997, Travers 2004).

The creation of the Barcelona ‘model’ of city governance, urban spectacle-related regeneration and concomitant ideology of urban autonomy similarly does not make much sense without considering the urban and Catalan party systems, their relations to the broader Spanish polity and their distinct articulations of urban and national identity. These are fairly direct examples, but theorising parties seems important to understanding other key urban political institutions. Mayors, for example, as empowered individuals, are quite difficult to capture in the frame of most social or political theory. In the New York case, grasping the specificities of characters such as LaGuardia, Koch or Giuliani depends on a background of understandings about how their ‘individuality’ and affective appeal is constructed against a more routine set of partisan understandings and institutions, and how these relate to, for example, the salience of identifications such as race and ethnicity (Mollenkopf 1997; Kaufmann 2003, 2004).

In this context, rather than developing examples at length or prematurely attempting a revised analytical framework raising the profile of party as a category in analysing urban politics, this paper proceeds through a set of hypotheses as to why parties are such elusive characters on the urban studies stage. These concern, in turn: the characteristics of the literature on parties; the treatment of ‘change’ as a theme in human geography and urban studies; the effects of the dominance of the United States in the theoretical literature on urban politics; the characterisation of political ‘actors’ in this literature; and related issues surrounding the challenges parties pose to research at a normative-democratic level. In the process I suggest cautiously reinserting parties as forming part of an array of urban collective forms repaying attention in accounting for urban political transformation and, of course, inertia. I also emphasise the usefulness of parties as a space within which to think through problems of agency and democracy in the city and beyond. The conclusions then reflect on the evasion of parties and partisanship in relation to a possible aversion to construing urban politics, and perhaps urban justice, in post-humanist terms.

## **The Neglect of Parties in Urban research: some hypotheses**

### *I. The effects of the 'party' literatures*

Political science and sociology are, considered as wholes, much larger fields than urban studies and exhibit much higher levels of specialisation and literature differentiation. Without taking account of the literatures on urban politics or social movements, the specific literatures on political parties, like many such sub-fields, are quite segregated from even closely-related areas such as electoral studies or legislative analysis. Moreover, and more so than in the social movement field, there seems to be a stronger differentiation within the literature, which straddles different disciplines. This is perhaps especially clear in the differentiation between the comparative literature on parties and the large one specifically on the U.S. case. Theoretical papers on parties are commonly typological in character (Gunther and Diamond 2003), describe the listing, prioritising, or transformation of party functions or constituency linkages, or seek to characterise parties by analogy with other social entities, typically bureaucracies or firms (e.g. Carty 2004). Along similar lines, there is a rational actor orientated literature descending ultimately from Schumpeter (1948) and Downs (1957), strongest in the United States, (Schlesinger 1991). Otherwise, there is an enormous amount of often rich historical work discussing the emergence and transformation of parties, and occasionally party systems, in particular (usually national) contexts.

Admittedly, analysts of parties have a hard time. They confront an enormously varied world of historical and contemporary organisations, and their subject matter shades off rapidly into a variety of related fields, including electoral studies and the analysis of party systems and legislative coalitions. Nonetheless, the 'weakness' of the literature and of theory is a common refrain in the field itself, and much discussion still seems to revolve around a small number of themes handed down by the political scientists of the 1950s and 1960s. These concern, in particular, the characterisation of parties subsequent to the mass-mobilising organisations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and related issues about the vitality of contemporary parties and their relationships to political 'cleavages' of long or short duration. Most of it is not centrally concerned with relating parties to broader social-theoretic or philosophical debates or frameworks. It is also, and this is increasingly under scrutiny in the literature itself (see

Gunther and Diamond 2004; Montero and Gunther 2002, 14), ethno-centric, with concepts clearly reflecting the histories of a small number of European (especially the German SPD) and American (particularly the Democratic party) party trajectories.

Much of the specialist literature is highly valuable in its own right, particularly in correcting some of the more broad-brush assumptions made about parties in other literatures and in the public sphere. The arguments that follow will draw extensively on some of its debates and findings. A literature cannot be held responsible for its non-reading by those not in its field, but it is nevertheless likely that its specialisation and particular preoccupations constitute one reason why the convincing re-integration of parties into either the critical theory or analysis of local or other political systems has been slow to come about.

## *II. Changing times, changing politics*

In recent human geography and urban studies, (as in other social science fields including the study of parties), there has been an apparent premium placed on arguments about transitions from one state of affairs to another (see Low and Barnett 2000). This transformational ‘hook’ is clearly a useful strategy in the politics of academic recognition, as well as helping bind together work on rather disparate subject matters (as in geography) into an overall shared narrative. So, transformations in local and regional economies, social life, culture and politics can be bundled together into structured narratives with ‘befores’ and ‘afters’ linking a coherently delimited past with a projected future explicitly or implicitly assembled from calculations about the direction of new trends and the forms of life in other sectors of social life that conform or otherwise with their implications.

New things are important, but several aspects of this sort of knowledge-framing strategy are problematic. It can lead to an over-emphasis on the replacement of forms over the transition from one systemic state to another. New kinds of firm, new forms of governance, state and party supplanting institutions at a variety of scales, new products, new forms of mobilisation, new cultural configurations, new forms of theory are all consequently highlighted. Sometimes this takes the form of, as it were, sectoral discussions of ‘newness’ as in, for example, the burgeoning work on ‘the new economy’

or on, indeed, 'new social movements'. In broader theorisations, such as those associated with the regulation approach, for example, the emergence of the new achieves a higher significance through the postulation of emergent overall forms of capitalist societal regulation, affecting economy, culture, normative orientations and political institutions. From the point of view of urban politics, tracking transformations in this manner can lead to a preoccupation in particular with new forms of governance, said to be 'rising' everywhere (but see John 2003, Legalès 2002 for useful correctives), new forms of executive as opposed to party-council leadership (Borraz and John 2004), new forms of rule such as 'heterarchy' (Jessop 2000), new forms of popular mobilisation, and new overall statuses for cities (Borja and Castells 1997). In the case of parties, certain generalisations about declining membership bases, increased voter independence and volatility, declining electoral turnout, decreased ideological polarisation and increasing leadership power have no doubt led to, at best, a neglect in framing pictures of the new. At worst these factors have buttressed a set of assumptions about 'decline' that suit the delineation of an alternative political future where parties, like states, have no secure place, displaced by various flexible reticulated forms of political action.

Of course parties in some places are 'stronger' than those in others, and within party systems there are various levels of organisational coherence and effectiveness of partisan action. Parties can historically go through periods of atrophy and seeming irrelevance. It is useful to figure out why this is so and what the implications might be. But some caution is in order because, as most of the specialised literature now suggests, parties have not been 'declining' in a generic way since an earlier heroic period, Fordist or otherwise, of mass parties or integrated political machines. Naturally they have changed in many ways since the mid-twentieth century, in response to changing demographic and electoral imperatives, sources of financing, movement challenges, new technologies such as television and the internet, and the increasing influence of consultants and other 'knowledge-producers.' And their relationship to electorates has altered in many contexts as a result. But, even in the United States, the paradigm example perhaps in recent decline-of-party talk (see Silbey 2002), the consensus is now that parties are different but surprisingly vital.

The focus there has moved from describing 'decline' to delineating their transformed, more loosely-coupled, but (because of the almost permanent campaigning currently in the U.S.) in some ways more institutionalised activity on the ground (see Beck et al 1999; Bibby 1998, 2002; Friendreis et al 1996; Monroe 2001). The complexity of American parties, and their institutionalisation in legislatures, is naturally a cause of debate about their boundaries and where the 'real' party is located (see Shea and Hildreth 1996 for the New York example). Moreover, unlike many parties elsewhere, 'vision' about what to accomplish in the urban context can be disappointingly missing among activists (see Margolis and Resnick 1996 on Cincinnati). But local transformations are possible (Binning et al 1996), and, on the whole, the apparent *increasing* atrophy of local parties may be as much a product of lack of research as of any real trend, especially given that ideal-typical models of past vitality are not necessarily very accurate (Friendreis et al 1990; Mayhew 1986; Monroe 2001). So, what is sometimes presented in dramatic terms such as 'breakdown' (Ware 1985) might be better characterised, boringly but plausibly, as transformation and re-configuration.

Elsewhere, much the same scepticism about narratives of decline is in the ascendant, which is not to suggest that matters are at all static (e.g. Daalder 2002, Katz 1990, Katz and Mair 1993, Mair 1997, Puhle 2002). Specifically, in the context of arguments about party redundancy in the face of, for example, the greater flexibility of movement organisations, and their greater resonance in the minds of informed 'post-materialist' publics, some care is necessary. Early arguments influenced by the new social movement literature to the effect that parties had lost their role in providing state-citizen 'linkage' (e.g. Lawson and Merkl 1988) seemed plausible in the face of the proliferation of movements and single-issue organizations in the 1970s and early 1980s. But, as some doubts crept in about the limits of the political capacity of the 'new' social movements, and historical perspective suggested a more complex set of relationships over time between movements and parties, this sort of argument has become less widely made. Parties and movements have a long, mutually-imbricated history. Sometimes, parties arise out of movements, paradigmatically social democratic and labour parties, but also populist and agrarian parties, green parties and nationalist and anti-immigration parties come to mind. In post-colonial situations the relevance of the movement-party

interface should be very obvious. This sort of relationship is not simple, with such parties continuing to exist within a broader field of collective action organised around similar, or often rather different, understandings and goals. Parties can also become transformed by movement activity. The established left or center-left parties on both sides of the Atlantic were deeply affected by the movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, although the relationships established were often external rather than internalised in party structures. On the right, the Republican Party, itself initially a product of the diverse free-soil and abolitionist movements of the 1840s and 1850s, has shifted to the right not simply because of economic imperatives or financial contributions, but also because of right-wing activism in the form of anti-tax mobilisations and Christian organisations. When parties are weak, as, for example the Democrats were in the Northeast before 1932, or the Republicans in the South until the 1970s, the invasion of movement related forces has been both possible and achieved a remarkable degree of transformative power on the political scene. The 'new left' politics of local Labour parties in U.K. cities and elsewhere in the 1980s was no doubt facilitated by analogous forms of turning weakness to advantage (see, *inter alia*, Goodwin et al. 1993).

So, although it would be convenient to temporally segregate 'old' parties from 'new' movements, particularly in the context of various models of transition, it would not be especially productive or accurate. In thinking about this relationship of attitudes to parties to transformation, and especially given the Marxism-inflected variants of many of these schemes today, it is worth bearing in mind Poulantzas' (1973) discussion of what he, following Marx, calls 'the political scene' (pp 245-52; 317-21). The political scene is the world of everyday politics as expressed in the changing fortunes of parties, the transformation of party systems, electoral politics and the formation of opposing political ideologies. Although, of course, Poulantzas is concerned with the relationship between this scene and other concepts such as power bloc, hegemonic class, form of state and so on, that confirm the power of capital over states even where appearances suggest otherwise, the drift of his argument is not that the political scene is not worth studying as a result. His strategy, as throughout, is to endow party politics with its own specificity by reference to its differential temporality, its specific rhythms of activity and events that may not map on to those of class formation and state transformation in any clear way. He

specifically makes the point that ‘politics’, as expressed through parties, elections, and relations of representation between politicians and social categories, does not necessarily consist of patterns of shorter duration than transformations in the overall organisation of class rule in capitalist formations. So, rather than being a kind of ‘surface froth’ over the deep waves of capitalist hegemony, parties and associated institutions and actors can be of surprisingly long duration, albeit with transformed significance in the light of the changes going on elsewhere. This links, intriguingly, with the commonly made comment about the apparently deeply embedded nature of most parties in the twentieth century, and the, on the whole, continuity rather than transformation in party systems in national, and certainly at urban, scales (see Mair 1997 for a good discussion). It is not necessary to debate here the degree to which Poulantzas’ overall conceptualisation of capitalism holds up today. But this particular line of argument does reinforce the message that an interest in transformation should be tempered with caution about the displacement of obsolete parties with other political mechanisms.

### *III. The lure of the United States*

Weber was not alone in his evidently fascinated use of the United States as a starting point in examining modern urbanised politics. Urban political theory is to a remarkable degree dominated by U.S. scholars and literature. Although much the same could be said about a number of areas of political analysis of a variety of theoretical persuasions, this dominance is to some degree deserved. European scholars, while they have contributed a great deal to the analysis of policy change, and the contextualisation of urban politics in broader changes in social life, have not, it would be fair to say, generated a parallel body of focused urban political theory. Some of the reasons for the absence of parties and elections in the urban politics literature have, then, to do with specificities of the US context. Round after round of urban political theorising in the U.S. has avoided incorporating parties and elections in any salient manner. If we take Hunter’s (1953) *Community Power Structure* as a sort of ‘primal’ moment for U.S. understandings of urban politics, we can already see how the context of mid-twentieth century Atlanta, particularly its one-party-ness and limited democratisation, combined with a necessary emphasis on business power, led to a conceptualisation of urban politics that depended

for its force on asserting that politics is not what it is on the 'political scene'. Dahl (1961) and the subsequent debates around theorising power and decisions, *despite* Dahl's analysis of party in his book, sealed the tendency of debate to focus elsewhere than on party politics and elections.

Of course, there are a number of good reasons for this trajectory, not least the peculiarities of American parties, the lack of partisan competition in many American cities, and the much more significant direct involvement of business in American city politics (see Harding 1991). Yet this has had an undeniable effect generally on the analysis of urban politics that has led to difficulties theoretically incorporating ideologically and organisationally different parties elsewhere, where direct business involvement has been less of a norm. The last two crucial moments in the on-going production of 'frameworks' for urban political analysis, the theories of growth machines and urban regimes, are especially interesting in this regard, and have led to many attempts to 'apply' their insights to non-U.S. contexts, usually with limited success. Both approaches could almost be said to have their *raison d'être* in by-passing so-called formal politics in understanding how politics goes on in U.S. urban centres. In the case of the growth machine, the name is designed to suggest the supplanting of an old form of urban politics centred in the party-electoral realm with a new form centred on locally-embedded capital (Molotch 1976, Logan and Molotch 1986, Cox and Mair 1989). In the case of urban regimes (Stone 1989, 1993; Stone and Sanders 1987), the regime concept is explicitly developed to provide a framework of analysis that by-passes the temporality of the 'political scene' and focus analysis instead on collective action problems giving rise to predictable enduring linkages between politicians and (mainly) business interests, conceptualised this time in terms of urban leadership capacity. This continual by-passing of the partisan in theory would make sense if parties had ever been at the centre of attention in theorising urban politics. But, and perhaps especially in a context where business power has rightly been a key topic for analysis, it is a pity that the configuration and potential of any kind of countervailing presence (parties and the movement-party field) have no strong theoretical presence in this literature. The construction of objects for urban political analysis, then, has, partly through conditions in US cities, partly through choices made by theorists in the context of a long series of debates, led to a vacuum in the

partisan area that is (even if justifiable to some degree in the U.S. case) more serious when American theory travels to other geo-political contexts.

It could even be suggested that the increasing focus on cities in the West of the United States, paradigmatically Los Angeles, in the 1980s and 1990s has exacerbated this tendency, because of the geographically-differentiated processes of reform that transformed many city governments into structures where parties had less power in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Shefter 1986). Although it can be argued that political parties are in fact important in contexts such as Los Angeles, albeit in new and less visible forms (Monroe 2001), the more publicly non-partisan and more managerial institutions in many American cities inherited from this reform period are admittedly less promising contexts for theorising parties in cities than elsewhere. Further east, however, more detailed analysis of parties as well as associated institutions of electoral democracy has been unavoidable. Pecorella (1987), for example, integrates the analysis of party transformation with regime theory in a compelling way in an analysis of New York City politics since the mid 1800s. John Mollenkopf (1996) is interesting for his attempt to explicitly incorporate parties and elections into the analysis of politics in the same city, in the context of the various models of urban politics available in the U.S. literature. His analysis of politics in the aftermath of the city's fiscal crisis is noteworthy for refusing unmediated explanations of political change deriving from economic or class analysis. Parties, partisans and party organisation figure prominently in his discussion, although they do not form the central object of his study, which is a 'coalition', a familiar enough concept in recent urban politics, but developed here in more political terms. The status of 'coalition' in Mollenkopf's book is not, however, an alternative object for study to 'formal politics', as is the growth machine or the urban regime. It does however, raise some issues about what counts as an actor in urban politics to which I now turn.

#### *IV. Are parties 'actors'?*

Problems involved in discussing what a 'coalition' might be in some ways lead to the heart of the matter. Like a 'growth machine', or as it is sometimes called a 'growth coalition' (Cox and Mair 1989), the word coalition seems to minimally satisfy the reader's expectations of 'actor-ness' in describing a key element in urban political

explanation while retaining a sense of its complex composition. As the central object of Mollenkopf's research, the 'Koch coalition' is indeed an advance on those forms of urban political analysis he effectively critiques as partial, and offering insufficiently determinate explanations of the political scene in New York City. 'Coalition' here is broader than party because it embraces *elements* of the City's Democratic organisation alongside business interests and particular voting constituencies (particularly Jewish and white Catholic voters). It is also broader than party, in a sense owing more to Stone's regime approach, in that reproducing it is central to *governing* the city as well as to electoral politics. But, although its use is probably unavoidable, from a distance it is difficult to conceptualise what, exactly, a coalition is. It is not an actor – Ed Koch is the strategic orchestrator of much of what goes on in Mollenkopf's book – and not exactly a 'resource' or 'infrastructural' complex either. It is not exactly a pattern of support, financial or vote-wise, in elections, as the coalition continues to underpin Koch's regime when in power.

The idea of a coalition is clearly useful, but raises questions about the notion of what counts as an 'actor' in urban politics, and indeed creates problems for any direct application of Weber's collective actor definition of party in urban contexts. Between politicians and individual realtors or bankers, groups of neighbourhood actors, not-for-profits, social movements, political parties, growth machines, urban governments, regimes and coalitions, there is an apparent gradation of actor-ness (Hocking 1999; Legalès 2002). Sometimes this is covered over by language curiously close to that of rational actor analysis (where individuals, firms, parties and so on can be treated in equivalent fashion). Sometimes it leads to a focus on objects of analysis that in some sense meet minimal requirements to be 'actors' because they are easier to research or to impute interests to (business and focused movement or interest group mobilisations) or because it is easier to imagine how they could achieve some set of obvious goals. I shall return to this apparent 'variable' like quality of actor-ness in the conclusions. For now it is enough to emphasise that a certain 'coherence expectation' that we usually have about actors can be all too readily translated into an inability to analyse or to some extent 'see' actors that do not meet our minimal requirements for coherence. When these expectations are translated into looking at political parties, not surprisingly, the results are fatal.

Businesses and social movement organisations are themselves complex in many ways, but political parties are often much more difficult to grasp from a single point of analytic vision, let alone to view as effective actors in any standard sense. They perform a whole series of tasks, in consequence embedding within themselves, or in their relationship with the public and other organisations, an array of different kinds of social processes, from communication, service provision, mediation of interests, funding elections, mobilising voters, suppressing the mobilisation of other potential voters, maintaining staffs, organising media relations, motivating and providing selective incentives for voluntary activists, structuring legislative, executive and in some cases judicial power, and endlessly working to reconfigure issues and images into effective ideological languages. Parties have to stitch together heterogeneous electoral coalitions, if they are to maximise or satisfice their political positions. This obviously has an effect on their public images, as it can result in an appearance of vagueness and mutability of ideological position and commonly a sense that parties don't represent anyone in particular. This puzzle about representation has fed strongly into the 'decline of party' idea. This source of antipathy, however, is the flip side of the coin of aggregating large political constituencies in a context where financing large scale political mobilisation is ever more complex and dependent on private sector resources.

Moreover, parties are not 'urban' or 'national' per se, but, if they have any degree of electoral competitiveness, stretch out, usually in inevitably non-hierarchical ways (see Carty 2004) to link up and mediate a variety of spaces from the voting station to the street or ward to the city, its suburbs, broader regional or state institutions, the national state and even (to some degree) beyond. This spatial complexity can be another source of intra-party ideological and organisational heterogeneity and apparent vagueness, but it reflects and in part helps constitute, the spatial complexity of democracy under modern conditions (Low 2004). In joining up very different citizen constituencies, across space (and via symbolic tradition, through time), maintaining relations with business and other sources of resources, connecting with a variety of other political entities including movements of various kinds, and linking all these with state institutions and policy debate, formulation and implementation, we could say parties have been exemplary forms of governance structures before governance as such was ever said to be 'rising'.

Matters are made worse by the fact that parties at all scales are embedded in party systems, which may have different compositions locally than they do nationally. To quote Schattschneider (1942), “(d)emocracy is not to be found in parties but *between* the parties” (p 60). Democracy, though if it exists it surely happens in this mediated way, is not only about what goes on between parties. A host of other vehicles for citizen expression and debate have to be factored in as well. But it is not surprising that at the level of conceptualising city politics, other actors are more readily *seen* than parties. Nicely emblematic of this is the title of Lustiger-Thaler and Shragge (1998) which refers, in the context of the breakdown of relations between a progressive urban-based party and the grassroots in Montreal, to parties ‘without actors.’ Social movements as well as firms, government departments and NGOs, all seem more ‘actorly’, in the final analysis, than do political parties.

So the status of parties as political ‘actors’ in the sense that a bank or a neighbourhood group are actors is always going to be hard to see. This is probably one reason why certain semi-fictitious models of coherent parties – the machine, the mass party before bureaucratisation set in, the communist party (see Gill 1990, 1998) -- have tended to exert particular fascination over theory in this area (see Monroe 2001, pp.33-41; 115-117). It is another reason why party-theory seems to oscillate between typologising on the basis of different social bases or organisational characteristics (or both) and rather too clear-cut definitions of parties as single-mindedly fixated on electoral success. The latter is a key characteristic of course, but one which also facilitates too quick a transition between individual action and party characteristics, particularly, as is often the case, parties conceptualised within a post-Downsian form of rational actor analysis (Schlesinger 1991)<sup>3</sup>.

The difficulty in viewing parties as actors, or renovating what we expect of an actor to accommodate them, goes further than accounts of urban politics, and hence matters in terms of the general direction of political life in cities. One argument for supplanting party structured councils with relatively unencumbered executive mayors, common in media debates about urban politics, is that, literally, mayors are better or more

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<sup>3</sup> Monroe (2001), in his otherwise interesting account of party organisation in Los Angeles County, seems to me to make this mistake.

'proper' actors than collectivities of politicians. Mayors can get things done, decide decisively and provide a basis for popular identification and hence better accountability. Read quickly, these sorts of arguments sometimes seem rather convincing at an empirical level, but they embody various normative emphases about democracy that are worth discussion, particularly as post-party politics arguments have been important in talk about the virtues of executive mayors in the UK and elsewhere.

#### *IV. Democratic theory and normative expectations*

One possible story about formal and informal politics in cities has to do with the displacement by movements of party politics. This sort of argument is related to the time when scholars discovered the 'new' social movement, is not one that has wide credibility today, but still seems to have a certain organising 'pull' on research, especially in discussions of globalisation and scale. There has been a growing and interesting literature on urban social movements, progressively loosening itself a little from the dominance of the Castells paradigm in the 1980s (Fainstein and Hirst 1995). But it has mostly (see Ceccarelli 1982, for an early example of a linking concern) focused on movement goals, mobilisation and success, often in relation to substantive normative ideals, as opposed to the working out of democratic normativity through the field of urban politics as a whole. Partly because of the segregation of social movement and party literatures in reality (see Tarrow 1990), the relationship between parties and movements in cities has not received so much attention, even although this is probably the area of research into urban politics where this sort of linkage might be most readily made.

Relations between the party and movement literatures and scholarly communities are complicated by the formal/ informal politics distinction, one of the least useful divisions haunting contemporary political analysis. It has emerged in relation to parties partly as a function of the unusual legalistic nature of American parties in particular (Epstein 1986), which Monroe (2001) has argued has led researchers to look for parties in the wrong places, such as party organisational headquarters, missing their broader, looser, multi-institutional presence in American politics, including their institutionalisation between states and communities. It has also been important because it connotes something else, an opposition between the inertial routines of procedurally bound

representative democracy to more spontaneous, less regulated and hence more directly effective, forms of collective action. But all this can be said without raising a false wall between urban party and movement sectors, and without extending a positive valuation of spontaneity and speed into an unnecessarily categorical attitude to the value of the more repetitive, and usually, Mayors aside, fairly anonymous work done by various party-affiliated urban politicians and their staff. Most writing about civil society organisations and social movements today would probably agree with Abu-Lughod's (1998) contention that these cannot generally be said, given their multiplicity of value orientations and projects, to have some clearly different normative status from more conventional or hierarchical political forms. As Storper (1998) has argued, the focus of political research in cities might more productively fall on hybrid forms of organisation cutting across state-civil society boundaries, among which parties would certainly figure.

That this sort of dividing impulse still seems quite important in urban studies and elsewhere is probably related to broader problems with democratic theory that affect our ability to intellectually process political complexity. Parties, if they fall into Storper's 'hybrid' category, are organisationally complicated mediators, which do not fit well with values of directness and transparency informing many conceptions of what democracy should be like. The basic concepts of much western political theory, and many basic conceptions of democracy, pre-existed parties and modern mass democracy. To the extent that parties figure in much of the 'tradition' (Hume, Tocqueville, etc) they are viewed as awkward or even pernicious obstacles to political order or justice. Attitudes to civil society actors have, however, often been markedly different, and this has partially been fuelling the concern with civic engagement and social capital in contemporary urban studies. Attitudes to parties have further been shaped by the reaction against the development of mass forms of political participation, typically associated with big cities. These were expressed through the reforming (and in many ways de-democratising) impulses of American business and the middle class in the early twentieth century. They also surface in the writings of the earliest analysts of parties, Bryce, Ostrogorski, and to some extent Weber and Michels. These anxieties are linked to a complex of social attitudes regarding working class political 'maturity' and, in particular, capacity to connect their real interests to politics when insufficiently scrutinised, monitored, or

controlled. Thus they relate to the perceived threat posed by the emerging apparatus of party organisation, mediation and the secret ballot to publicity and visibility in politics. John Stuart Mill's hostility to the secret ballot is emblematic of a widespread set of cultural anxieties about the complex, invisible politics of democracy in a new urban world. This world could equally be symbolised by Thomas Nast's famous satirical illustrations of American machine politics, that helped establish the metaphor of an impenetrable 'smoke-filled room' as an emblem of a modern democracy gone wrong.

Good politics, much of political theory tells us, is visible, public, and works best when as direct a connection between constituency expression of interest and political decision as possible is established. Part of any *generalised* preference for social movements over electoral democracy in the literature – indeed the very idea that these might be alternative rather than different and necessarily co-existing forms of mobilisation – stems from such ultimately logocentric conceptions of democracy (Low 1997, 2003, 2004). But more than in their problematic relationship to public-ness or visibility, parties are challenging to these impulses in theory because whatever goes on through them is necessarily indirect and mediated and whatever democratic work they do involves necessarily losing and reshaping some of the message transmitted to them by particular individuals and constituencies. The direct/ representative democracy polarity is interesting in part because - by focusing on the normative values we attribute to proximity, distance, directness, mediation, 'face-to-face' and 'stretched-out' interaction – it implicates the necessarily spatial constitution of democracy in the most basic and difficult way. Political parties, viewed from the perspective of this set of geo-democratic problems, while often unattractive in the light of accumulated normative theorising, foist the complexity of making democracy work within and across spaces right under our noses. The relationship of democracy to the economy (and other areas of social life) has been hampered by a recognition of the importance of complexity and indirect, mediated processes in the latter, but of the ideal lack of these in the former. Those unhappy with the 'invisible hand' in the economy should probably worry about it not because it is invisible but because something about the way it works is systematically unjust. Similarly, in politics, it is important not to develop fixed expectations about the

correlation of expected justice with more visible, transparent or direct forms of popular mobilisation.

The difficulty of viewing democracy, in those normative terms appropriate to thinking about justice, as a complex, mediated and perhaps necessarily, in some respects, un-transparent set of processes of uncertain outcome is, then, another reason why parties never seem to be centralised or centralisable in urban political analysis. None of this is to say that urban parties or party systems in some intrinsic way produce more social justice in cities than other forms of consultation, participation or mobilisation: empirically, they may well not do so, depending on their organisational capacity, social linkages, funding, ideological character, and other variables. Nonetheless, if they fail to produce more justly ordered urban life, it is surely not because they are hard to conceptualise adequately as actors or that, and partly because of this, they do not 'map' onto the terms of a humanist politics of direct democratic communication.

### *Conclusions*

In this paper I have suggested several reasons why political parties and urban political theory seem to have problems connecting up, emphasising factors to do with differential literatures and their characteristics, the role of transformation in structuring theory in the field, the influence of American theory in particular, and problems in coping with degrees of actor-ness and complexity in conceptualising politics and democracy. Some of these hypotheses are more straightforward than others, and I have not set them out to suggest that they jointly form some broader syndrome affecting urban, or broader, political theory. There may also be other important reasons or causes for the apparent neglect that is at issue here. It is not the case, necessarily, that incorporating political parties more centrally into thinking about cities would dramatically alter many of our current perceptions of urban politics, although it might well do in contexts outside the United States at least, where differentiated and more mobilising parties are more of a norm. It might, however, encourage a little more normative honesty about political options in cities as well as, especially in more policy-oriented work, encourage less of a de-politicised focus on forms of mobilisation, consultation, networking and governance that

miss or even seek to bypass the larger scale work of partisan mobilisation, debate and elections.

Dramatic alterations, such as establishing parties, are mostly not on the agenda of contemporary intellectual politics, except perhaps in the sometimes surprisingly neat world of globalization studies where new urban parties might fit with a logic of city-region autonomisation (Borja and Castells 1997). But parties are not immutable and periodically in cities, or through the ways in which they channel politics between scales, they transform, become more important or organised in different ways, and divide the space of political debate in cities up differently into transformed partisan (and by reaction other) views of what is to be done. Their work is often un-glamorous, perhaps even boring, and their positions are not always ideologically coherent or even attractive, when compared to worked-out academic conceptions of justice, or the coherent world-views academics and citizens often imagine they have formed.

But these partisan organisations and views structure and channel much of what goes on in politics and much of whatever routine democracy there currently is in and between cities is processed through them, or defined in relation to them. In Weber's world of conflicting political values where it is difficult if not impossible to escape the everyday politics of parties, their politics and their programmes, we are still all partisans in a sense. We define our positions against others, measuring our capacity to however momentarily submerge our qualms about aspects of a particular party and vote, or position ourselves as part of the party of the disenchanting with all current institutionalised partisan offerings. Not talking about the partisan, moreover, facilitates talk about an undivided politics around 'citizenship' or community versus business or capital that is unfortunately common in urban research and policy. At the limit this is a symptom of an unhelpful variety of humanism, where any 'real' or 'good' politics has to be an unmediated expression of individual or group values, in short, the values of a coherent actor. It is also a symptom of a kind of anti-urbanism, just as it has been in several varieties of political theory where an imagined city where politics was virtuous because public and undivided was for long used as a weapon for critique of the complexity and conflict that are constitutive of modern urban politics. One solution to this anti-urbanism has been a focus on movements of various kinds. It would be a mistake, however, to

focus on these too exclusively as vehicles for mobilisation, challenge, and normative hope in cities. Parties are not, generally speaking, 'justice movements', but some parties in some places certainly have been, and more just urban orderings will likely depend on something like partisan organisations to implement and underpin them.

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