From The Urban Sociology Reader, eds. Jan Lin and Christopher Mele:

Logan and Molotch reject the human ecology view that places and land markets are the natural outcome of Darwinian and market processes in favor of a Marxist-influenced political economy perspective. They comprehend homes not just as places that are "lived," but also as commodities within real estate markets that can be bought and exchanged, generating use and exchange values for producers and consumers. They see prices and markets, importantly, as social phenomena, governed by natural laws of competition, supply, and demand, but by inequalities of wealth, ownership, and power. Places organize and distribute life chances in a class stratification system. As commodities, places also acquire special use and exchange values. In terms of use value, homes, neighborhoods, local businesses, localities, and other places obtain a special preciousness for people characterized by intense sentiment, commitment, or attachment. In terms of exchange values, places are idiosyncratic and not substitutable in the fashion of other commodities such as cars, clothes, and food, because real estate is a more limited and finite resource. Because property markets are structured by access to infrastructure such as jobs, housing, transportation, schools, hospitals, and other resources, places determine life chances and are key components of the American class stratification system.

Place entrepreneurs such as landlords, businessmen, developers, transportation and utility companies, banks, and corporations gain profit from their control of land and from the proceeds of economic growth. There are serendipitous, active, and structural entrepreneurs, with varying levels of access to capital as well as place attachment. Place entrepreneurs form pro-growth coalitions with governmental units and other economic interests to focus infrastructure and urban development in areas that intensify the profitability of their own interests. They promote a good business climate and an ideology of growth as a public good through their influence on politicians and the media. They foster a booster spirit through partnerships with schools and civic organizations with essay contests, public celebrations and spectacles such as dedications, soapbox derbies, parade floats, and beauty contests. Growth machines have evolved from small groups of local power brokers to a more multifaceted matrix of auxiliary interests and institutions that include universities, museums, conventions centers, sports franchises, entertainment conglomerates, and tourism interests such as theme parks. The growth machine works to suppress or deflect public consciousness from the negative social and environmental consequences of urban development. Citizens' movements have sprung up to contest the negative externalities of growth through protests, lobbying, public hearings, and environmental impact reviews.

Not only are there a similar concept of "growth coalitions" in his 1983 book,
The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place

Harvey Molotch

University of California, Santa Barbara

A city and, more generally, any locality, is conceived as the areal expression of the interests of some land-based elite. Such an elite is seen to profit through the increasing intensification of the land use of the area in which its members hold a common interest. An elite competes with other land-based elites in an effort to have growth-inducing resources invested within its own area as opposed to that of another. Governmental authority, at the local and nonlocal levels, is utilized to assist in achieving this growth at the expense of competing localities. Conditions of community life are largely a consequence of the social, economic, and political forces embodied in this growth machine. The relevance of growth to the interests of various social groups is examined in this context, particularly with reference to the issue of unemployment. Recent social trends in opposition to growth are described and their potential consequences evaluated.

Conventional definitions of "city," "urban place," or "metropolis" have led to conventional analyses of urban systems and urban-based social problems. Usually traceable to Wirth's classic and highly plausible formulation of "numbers, density and heterogeneity" (1938), there has been a continuing tendency, even in more recent formulations (e.g., Davis 1965), to conceive of place quite apart from a crucial dimension of social structure: power and social class hierarchy. Consequently, sociological research based on the traditional definitions of what an urban place is has had very little relevance to the actual, day-to-day activities of those at the top of local power structure whose priorities set the limits within which decisions affecting land use, the public budget, and urban social life come to be made. It has not been very apparent from the scholarship of urban social science that land, the basic stuff of place, is a market commodity providing wealth and power, and that some very important people consequently take a keen interest in it. Thus, although there are extensive literatures on community power as well as on how to define and conceptualize a city or urban place, there are few notions available to link the two issues coherently, focusing on the urban settlement as a political economy.

This paper aims toward filling this need. I speculate that the political

---

1 I have had the benefit of critical comments and assistance from Richard Appelbaum, Richard Baisden, Norman Bowers, Norton Long, Howard Newby, Anthony Shih, Tony Pepitone, Gerald Suttles, Gaye Tuchman, and Al Wyner.
and economic essence of virtually any given locality, in the present American context, is growth. I further argue that the desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites, however split they might be on other issues, and that a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among important people in a given locale—at least insofar as they have any important local goals at all. Further, this growth imperative is the most important constraint upon available options for local initiative in social and economic reform. It is thus that I argue that the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine.

The clearest indication of success at growth is a constantly rising urban-area population—a symptom of a pattern ordinarily comprising an initial expansion of basic industries followed by an expanded labor force, a rising scale of retail and wholesale commerce, more far-flung and increasingly intensive land development, higher population density, and increased levels of financial activity. Although throughout this paper I index growth by the variable population growth, it is this entire syndrome of associated events that is meant by the general term “growth.” I argue that the means of achieving this growth, of setting off this chain of phenomena, constitute the central issue for those serious people who care about their locality and who have the resources to make their caring felt as a political force. The city is, for those who count, a growth machine.

THE HUMAN ECOLOGY: MAPS AS INTEREST MOSAICS

I have argued elsewhere (Molotch 1967, 1973) that any given parcel of land represents an interest and that any given locality is thus an aggregate of land-based interests. That is, each landowner (or person who otherwise has some interest in the prospective use of a given piece of land) has in mind a certain future for that parcel which is linked somehow with his or her own well-being. If there is a simple ownership, the relationship is

2 This association of related phenomena is the common conceptualization which students of the economic development of cities ordinarily utilize in their analyses (see, e.g., Alonso 1964, pp. 79–81; Leven 1964, pp. 140–44; Brown 1974, pp. 48–51; and Durr 1971, pp. 174–80). As Sunquist remarks in the context of his study of population policies in Western Europe, “The key to population distribution is, of course, job availability. A few persons—retired, notably, and some independent professionals such as artists, writers and inventors—may be free to live in any locality they choose but, for the rest, people are compelled to distribute themselves in whatever pattern is dictated by the distribution of employment opportunities. Some investors may locate their investment in areas of surplus labour voluntarily, and so check the migration flow, and others may be induced by government assistance to do so. But if neither of these happens—if the jobs do not go where the workers are—the workers must go to the jobs, if they are not to accept welfare as a way of life. When population distribution is an end, then, job distribution is inevitably the means” (1975, p. 13).
straightforward: to the degree to which the land’s profit potential is enhanced, one’s own wealth is increased. In other cases, the relationship may be more subtle: one has interest in an adjacent parcel, and if a noxious use should appear, one’s own parcel may be harmed. More subtle still is the emergence of concern for an aggregate of parcels: one sees that one’s future is bound to the future of a larger area, that the future enjoyment of financial benefit flowing from a given parcel will derive from the general future of the proximate aggregate of parcels. When this occurs, there is that “we feeling” (McKenzie 1922) which bespeaks of community. We need to see each geographical map—whether of a small group of land parcels, a whole city, a region, or a nation—not merely as a demarcation of legal, political, or topographical features, but as a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action.

Each unit of a community strives, at the expense of the others, to enhance the land-use potential of the parcels with which it is associated. Thus, for example, shopkeepers at both ends of a block may compete with one another to determine in front of which building the bus stop will be placed. Or, hotel owners on the north side of a city may compete with those on the south to get a convention center built nearby (see Banfield 1961). Likewise, area units fight over highway routes, airport locations, campus developments, defense contracts, traffic lights, one-way street designations, and park developments. The intensity of group consciousness and activity waxes and wanes as opportunities for and challenges to the collective good rise and fall; but when these coalitions are of sufficiently enduring quality, they constitute identifiable, ongoing communities. Each member of a community is simultaneously the member of a number of others; hence, communities exist in a nested fashion (e.g., neighborhood within city within region), with salience of community level varying both over time and circumstance. Because of this nested nature of communities, subunits which are competitive with one another at one level (e.g., in an interblock dispute over where the bus stop should go) will be in coalition at a higher level (e.g., in an intercity rivalry over where the new port should go). Obviously, the anticipation of potential coalition acts to constrain the intensity of conflict at more local loci of growth competition.

Hence, to the degree to which otherwise competing land-interest groups collude to achieve a common land-enhancement scheme, there is community—whether at the level of a residential block club, a neighborhood association, a city or metropolitan chamber of commerce, a state development agency, or a regional association. Such aggregates, whether constituted formally or informally, whether governmental political institutions or voluntary associations, typically operate in the following way: an attempt is made to use government to gain those resources which will enhance the growth potential of the area unit in question. Often, the
governmental level where action is needed is at least one level higher than the community from which the activism springs. Thus, individual landowners aggregate to extract neighborhood gains from the city government; a cluster of cities may coalesce to have an effective impact on the state government, etc. Each locality, in striving to make these gains, is in competition with other localities because the degree of growth, at least at any given moment, is finite. The scarcity of developmental resources means that government becomes the arena in which land-use interest groups compete for public money and attempt to mold those decisions which will determine the land-use outcomes. Localities thus compete with one another to gain the *preconditions* of growth. Historically, U.S. cities were created and sustained largely through this process; it continues to be the significant dynamic of contemporary local political economy and is critical to the allocation of public resources and the ordering of local issue agendas.

Government decisions are not the only kinds of social activities which affect local growth chances; decisions made by private corporations also have major impact. When a national corporation decides to locate a branch plant in a given locale, it sets the conditions for the surrounding land-use pattern. But even here, government decisions are involved: plant-location decisions are made with reference to such issues as labor costs, tax rates, and the costs of obtaining raw materials and transporting goods to markets. It is government decisions (at whatever level) that help determine the cost of access to markets and raw materials. This is especially so in the present era of raw material subsidies (e.g., the mineral depletion allowance) and reliance on government approved or subsidized air transport, highways, railways, pipelines, and port developments. Government decisions influence the cost of overhead expenses (e.g., pollution abatement requirements, employee safety standards), and government decisions affect the costs of labor through indirect manipulation of unemployment rates, through the use of police to constrain or enhance union organizing, and through the legislation and administration of welfare laws (see Piven and Cloward 1972).

Localities are generally mindful of these governmental powers and, in addition to creating the sorts of physical conditions which can best serve industrial growth, also attempt to maintain the kind of “business climate” that attracts industry: for example, favorable taxation, vocational training, law enforcement, and “good” labor relations. To promote growth, taxes should be “reasonable,” the police force should be oriented toward protection of property, and overt social conflict should be minimized (see

---

8 For accounts of how “boosterism” worked in this manner, see Wade (1969) and Harris (1976).
Rubin 1972, p. 123; Agger, Goldrich, and Swanson 1964, p. 649). Increased utility and government costs caused by new development should be borne (and they usually are—see, e.g., Ann Arbor City Planning Department [1972]) by the public at large, rather than by those responsible for the “excess” demand on the urban infrastructure. Virtually any issue of a major business magazine is replete with ads from localities of all types (including whole countries) trumpeting their virtues in just these terms to prospective industrial settlers. In addition, a key role of elected and appointed officials becomes that of “ambassador” to industry, to communicate, usually with appropriate ceremony, these advantages to potential investors (see Wyner 1967).

I aim to make the extreme statement that this organized effort to affect the outcome of growth distribution is the essence of local government as a dynamic political force. It is not the only function of government, but it is the key one and, ironically, the one most ignored. Growth is not, in the present analysis, merely one among a number of equally important concerns of political process (cf. Adrian and Williams 1963). Among contemporary social scientists, perhaps only Murray Edelman (1964) has provided appropriate conceptual preparation for viewing government in such terms. Edelman contrasts two kinds of politics. First there is the “symbolic” politics which comprises the “big issues” of public morality and the symbolic reforms featured in the headlines and editorials of the daily press. The other politics is the process through which goods and services actually come to be distributed in the society. Largely unseen, and relegated to negotiations within committees (when it occurs at all within a formal government body), this is the politics which determines who, in material terms, gets what, where, and how (Lasswell 1936). This is the kind of politics we must talk about at the local level: it is the politics

---

4 Agger et al. remark, on the basis of their comparative study of four U.S. cities: “[Members of the local elites] value highly harmony and unity—‘pulling together.’ They regard local community affairs as essentially nonpolitical, and tend to associate controversy with ‘politics.’ An additional factor reinforcing the value of harmony in many communities . . . is the nationwide competition among communities for new industries. Conflict is thought to create a highly unfavourable image to outsiders, an image that might well repel any prospective industry” (1964, p. 649).

5 See, e.g., the May 19, 1974, issue of Forbes, which had the following ad placed by the State of Pennsylvania: “Q: [banner headline] What state could possibly cut taxes at a time like this? A: Pennsylvania [same large type]. Pennsylvania intends to keep showing businessmen that it means business. Pennsylvania. Where business has a lot growing for it. . . .” The state of Maryland ran this ad in the same issue: “Maryland Finances the Training. . . . In short, we can finance practically everything you need to establish a manufacturing plant. . . .”

6 The city of Los Angeles maintains an office, headed by a former key business executive, with this “liaison” role as its specific task (see “L.A.'s Business Envoy Speaks Softly and Sits at a Big Desk,” Los Angeles Times [August 26, 1974]).
of distribution, and land is the crucial (but not the only) variable in this system.

The people who participate with their energies, and particularly their fortunes, in local affairs are the sort of persons who—at least in vast disproportion to their representation in the population—have the most to gain or lose in land-use decisions. Prominent in terms of numbers have long been the local businessmen (see Walton 1970),7 particularly property owners and investors in locally oriented financial institutions (see, e.g., Spaulding 1951; Mumford 1961, p. 536), who need local government in their daily money-making routines. Also prominent are lawyers, syndicators, and realtors (see Bouma 1962) who need to put themselves in situations where they can be most useful to those with the land and property resources.8 Finally, there are those who, although not directly involved in land use, have their futures tied to growth of the metropolis as a whole. At least, when the local market becomes saturated one of the few possible avenues for business expansion is sometimes the expansion of the surrounding community itself (see Adrian and Williams 1963, p. 24).9

This is the general outline of the coalition that actively generates the community "we feeling" (or perhaps more aptly, the "our feeling")10 that comes to be an influence in the politics of a given locality. It becomes manifest through a wide variety of techniques. Government funds support "boosterism" of various sorts: the Chamber of Commerce, locality-promotion ads in business journals and travel publications, city-sponsored parade

---

7 The literature on community power is vast and controversial but has been summarized by Walton: he indicates, on the basis of 39 studies of 61 communities, that "the proportion of businessmen found in the leadership group is high irrespective of the type of power structure found" (1970, p. 446). It is my argument, of course, that this high level of participation does indeed indicate the exercise of power on behalf of at least a portion of the elite. My analysis does not assume that this portion of the elite is necessarily always united with others of high status on the concrete issues of local land use and the uses of local government.

8 Descriptions of some tactics typically employed in land-use politics are contained in McConnell (1966), Tolchin and Tolchin (1971), and Makielski (1966), but a sophisticated relevant body of literature does not yet exist.

9 Thus the stance taken by civic business groups toward growth and land-use matters affecting growth is consistently positive, although the intensity of commitment to that goal varies. In his study of New York City zoning, Makielski indicates that "the general business groups . . . approached zoning from an economic viewpoint, although this often led them to share the Reformer's ideology. Their economic interest in the city gave them a stake in a 'healthy,' 'growing community' where tax rates were not prohibitive, where city government was 'efficient,' and where some of the problems of the urban environment—a constraining labour force, congestion, and lack of space—were being attacked" (1966, p. 141). A similar dynamic has been observed in a medium-size Mexican city: "Despite many other differences, basic agreement on the primacy of stability and growth provides a basis for a dialogue between government and business" (Fagen and Tuohy 1972, p. 56).

10 Bruce Pringle suggested the latter phrase to me.
floats, and stadia and other forms of support for professional sports teams carrying the locality name. The athletic teams in particular are an extraordinary mechanism for instilling a spirit of civic jingoism regarding the "progress" of the locality. A stadium filled with thousands (joined by thousands more at home before the TV) screaming for Cleveland or Baltimore (or whatever) is a scene difficult to fashion otherwise. This enthusiasm can be drawn upon, with a glossy claim of creating a "greater Cleveland," "greater Baltimore," etc., in order to gain general acceptance for local growth-oriented programs. Similarly, public school curricula, children's essay contests, soapbox derbies, spelling contests, beauty pageants, etc., help build an ideological base for local boosterism and the acceptance of growth. My conception of the territorial bond among humans differs from those cast in terms of primordial instincts: instead, I see this bond as socially organized and sustained, at least in part, by those who have a use for it (cf. Suttles 1972, pp. 111–39). I do not claim that there are no other sources of civic jingoism and growth enthusiasm in American communities, only that the growth-machine coalition mobilizes what is there, legitimizes and sustains it, and channels it as a political force into particular kinds of policy decisions.
Special use values

People use place in ways contrary to the neoclassical assumptions of how commodities are purchased and consumed. We do not dispose of place after it has been bought and used. Places have a certain preciousness for their users that is not part of the conventional concept of a commodity. A crucial initial difference is that place is indispensable; all human activity must occur somewhere. Individuals cannot do without place by substituting another product. They can, of course, do with less place and less desirable place, but they cannot do without place altogether.

Even when compared to other indispensable commodities—food, for example—place is still idiosyncratic. The use of a particular place creates and sustains access to additional use values. One’s home in a particular place, for example, provides access to school, friends, work place, and shops. Changing homes disrupts connections to these other places and their related values as well. Place is thus not a discrete element, like a toy or even food; the precise conditions of its use determine how other elements, including other commodities, will be used. Any individual residential location connects people to a range of complementary persons, organizations, and physical resources.

The stakes involved in the relationship to place can be high, reflecting all manner of material, spiritual, and psychological connections to land and buildings. Numerous scholars have shown that given places achieve significance beyond the more casual relations people have to other commodities. The connection to place can vary in intensity for different class, age, gender, and ethnic groups; individual relationships to place are often characterized by intense feelings and commitments appropriate to long-term and multifaceted social and material attachments.

This special intensity creates an asymmetrical market relation between buyers and sellers. People pay what the landlord demands, not because the housing unit is worth it, but because the property is held to have idiosyncratic locational benefits. Access to resources like friends, jobs, and schools is so important that residents (as continuous consumers–buyers) are willing to resort to all sorts of “extramarket” mechanisms to fight for their right to keep locational relations intact. They organize, protest, use violence, and seek political regulation. They strive not just for tenure in a given home but for stability in the surrounding neighborhood as well.

Location establishes a special collective interest among individuals. People who have “bought” into the same neighborhood share a quality of public services (garbage pickup, police behavior); residents have a common stake in the area’s future. Residents also share the same fate when natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes threaten and when institutions alter the local landscape by creating highways, parks, or toxic dumps. Individuals are not only mutually dependent on what goes on inside a neighborhood (including “compositional effects”); they are affected by what goes on outside it as well. The standing of a neighborhood vis-à-vis other neighborhoods creates conditions that its residents experience in common. Each place has a particular political or economic standing vis-à-vis other places that affect the quality of life and opportunities available to those who live within its boundaries. A neighborhood with a critical voting bloc (for example, Chicago’s Irish wards in the 1930s) may generate high levels of public services or large numbers of patronage jobs for its working-class residents, thereby aiding their well being. A rich neighborhood can protect its residents’ life styles from external threats (sewer plants, public housing) in a way that transcends personal resources, even those typically associated with the affluent. The community in itself can be a local force.
Neighborhoods organize life chances in the same sense as do the more familiar dimensions of class and caste. . . Like class and status groupings, and even more than many other associations, places create communities of fate. Thus we must consider the stratification of places along with the stratification of individuals in order to understand the distribution of life chances. People’s sense of these dynamics, perceived as the relative “standing” of their neighborhood, gives them some of their spiritual or sentimental stake in place—thus further distinguishing home from other less life-significant, commodities.

Contrary to much academic debate on the subject, we hold that the material use of place cannot be separated from psychological use; the daily round that makes physical survival possible takes on emotional meanings through that very capacity to fulfill life’s crucial goals. The material and psychic rewards thus combine to create feelings of “community.” Much of residents’ striving as members of community organizations or just as responsible neighbors represents an effort to preserve and enhance their networks of sustenance. Appreciation of neighborhood resources, so varied and diffusely experienced, gives rise to “sentiment.” Sentiment is the inadequately articulated sense that a particular place uniquely fulfills a complex set of needs. When we speak of residents’ use values, we imply fulfillment of all these needs, material and non-material.

Homeownership gives some residents exchange value interests along with use value goals. Their houses are the basis of a lifetime wealth strategy.

For those who pay rent to landlords, use values are the only values at issue. Owners and tenants can thus sometimes have divergent interests. When rising property values portend neighborhood transformation, tenants and owners may adopt different community roles, but ordinarily, the exchange interests of owners are not sufficiently significant to divide them from other residents.

[...]

While a good opera or ballet company may subtly enhance the growth potential of some cities, other cultural ingredients are crucial for a good business climate. There should be no violent class or ethnic conflict. Racial violence in South Africa is finally leading to the disinvestment that reformers could not bring about through moral suasion. In the good business climate, the work force should be sufficiently quiet and healthy to be productive; this was the rationale originally behind many programs in work place relations and public health. Labor must, in other words, be “reproduced,” but only under conditions that least interfere with local growth trajectories.

Perhaps most important of all, local publics should favor growth and support the ideology of value-free development. This public attitude reassures investors that the concrete enticements of a locality will be upheld by future politicians. The challenge is to connect civic pride to the growth goal, tying the presumed economic and social benefits of growth in general to growth in the local area. Probably only partly aware of this, elites generate and sustain the place patriotism of the masses. . . In the nineteenth-century cities, the great rivalries over canal and railway installations were the political spectacles of the day, with attention devoted to their public, not private, benefits. With the drama of the new railway technology, ordinary people were swept into the competition among places, rooting for their own town to become the new “crossroads” or at least a way station.

The celebration of local growth continues to be a theme in the culture of localities. Schoolchildren are taught to view local history as a series of breakthroughs in the expansion of the economic base of their city and region, celebrating its numerical leadership in one sort of production or another. More generally, increases in population tend to be equated with local progress. Civic organizations sponsor essay contests on the topic of local greatness. They encourage public celebrations and spectacles in which the locality name can be proudly advanced for the benefit of both locals and outsiders. They subsidize soapbox derbies, parade floats, and beauty contests to “spread around” the locality’s name in the media and at distant competitive sites.
One case can illustrate the link between growth goals and cultural institutions. In the Los Angeles area, St. Patrick's Day parades are held at four different locales, because the city's Irish leaders can't agree on the venue for a joint celebration. The source of the difficulty (and much acrimony) is that these parades march down the main business streets in each locale, thereby making them a symbol of the life of the city. Business groups associated with each of the strips want to claim the parade as exclusively their own, leading to charges by still a fifth parade organization that the other groups are only out to make money. The countercharge, vehemently denied, was that the leader of the challenging business street was not even Irish. Thus even an ethnic celebration can receive its special form from the machinations of growth interests and the competitions among them.

The growth machine avidly supports whatever cultural institutions can play a role in building locality. Always ready to oppose cultural and political developments contrary to their interests (for example, black nationalism and communal cults), rentiers and their associates encourage activities that will connect feelings of community... to the goal of local growth. The overall ideological thrust is to de-emphasize the connection between growth and exchange values and to reinforce the link between growth goals and better lives for the majority. We do not mean to suggest that the only source of civic pride is the desire to collect rents; certainly the cultural pride of tribal groups predates growth machines. Nevertheless, the growth machine coalition mobilizes these cultural motivations, legitimizes them, and channels them into activities that are consistent with growth goals.