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PLACE-BASED OR PLACE-POSITIONED?
Framing and making the spaces of urban politics

Deborah G. Martin

Introduction

A famous saying in the United States usually attributed to ‘Tip’ O’Neill, a former Massachusetts politician and Speaker in the US House of Representatives, is that ‘all politics is local’, and certainly few politics are more local than ‘urban politics’, which by definition are based in some urban area or another. Politics can mean many things to people, but one way to think about urban politics is to think about how decisions in cities get made that affect all or most residents in one way or another. There are many spaces of politics within cities. ‘Local’ urban politics are those that shape or affect a particular part of a city, such as a business district or a neighbourhood.

Focusing on different spaces of urban politics, this chapter explores the dynamics of place politics research. Place politics involve explicit and implicit references to geographical norms or grievances in the form of ‘place-frames’. Such place politics may seem parochial and limited in potential transformative scope, given the often-restricted scope of urban territory enrolled in any given place conflict. Relational conceptualizations of place, however, which emphasize the spatially complex and disparate networks and processes producing any particular locality (city or neighbourhood), necessitate that considerations of politics reach beyond the urban locality. Attention to the politics of place-framing help to attend to the processes at work in shaping the dynamics of place politics, where the territory of contention, the stakeholders and claim-makers, can all be points of contestation and deliberation. The politics of place, then, are politics over what place, and whose place, and how much place are explicitly enrolled in contention and potential solutions.

Spaces of urban politics

There are at least three different kinds of politics that occur in urban areas and in two types of spaces. First, there are the ‘official’ decisions made in formal government locations like city hall. In this case, it is usually elected officials who are the key political actors, but appointed and city staff members of agencies also are involved in making policies in cities that affect people locally, such as whether the parks have playground equipment for kids, the traffic flow on city streets, and how often garbage is collected, and by whom (city employees or contracted private companies, for example). A second realm of urban politics, which extends from the first, involves
the people who live in cities. These might include residents who come to city hall or write or call to complain or inquire about an issue, such as why there is no crosswalk near a busy park, how much the city charges for parking, or why the police budget is bigger than the school budget (perhaps). Sometimes people come to city hall to speak at a city council meeting or public forum on some issue. These sorts of actions comprise part of the ‘formal’ realm of government and occur, at least in part, in official settings of urban government, although the decisions that are made influence all sorts of spaces in a city.

A third way that people practise urban politics is more informal, occurring away from, or overtly in opposition to, the formal realms and spaces of government; this latter form falls under popular notions of protest. Protests can be planned marches for some cause, or relatively unplanned and spontaneous gatherings. Protest politics may occur at formal spaces of government, such as city hall, but they occur more frequently in the public open spaces of a city rather than inside government offices. As such, they are more public and informal than the first two types of urban politics. A form of protest that has occurred more and more frequently in some North American cities are calls against police brutality and the seeming indiscriminate killing of black people associated with a ‘shoot first’ mentality of policing.

In all of these examples, urban politics is mostly about the city as a whole, or focuses on some constituent ‘local’ part of a city. Yet, the case of police brutality highlights that urban politics sometimes invoke national politics in that they can highlight issues that affect people in cities and elsewhere. But because cities are places where lots of people live together in relatively dense environments, the issues might be particularly evident in urban areas. Cities – or metropolitan areas comprised of cities, suburbs and sometimes even rural areas – are places where difference is manifest, and where access to jobs and services, such as schooling or housing, differentiate people and spaces within an urban area. For example, not everyone fears police, because not everyone is viewed by police in the same way. The relations between urban residents and formal systems of government such as policing are differently experienced; expectations on both sides, those of police and those of everyday individuals, are shaped in part on where they occur and who is involved (Duneier 1999). These differences can be especially stark where there are people in relative close proximity to one another yet experience the same service – policing or transportation, for example – in different ways.

Placements of urban politics

Just as cities can be places of difference, so also urban politics vary from place to place across the city. Politics change in different urban spaces, and much of the decision-making and contestations about urban politics have an underlying geography to them. The physical setting of municipal governments, most obviously evident at a place like ‘city hall’ (Figure 3.1), provides a clear signal in the built environment of the formal, official role of government in providing the resources and structure for daily life in that urban place. The politics that happen at city halls have an order and set of expectations governing their conduct at that specific place.

Likewise, other spaces have an expected order or a set of activities that are more or less regulated: sitting and playing in a park; driving by car along highways; cycling on city streets; walking on sidewalks, etc. When people protest some aspect of city policies or current events, they seek to disrupt the order of spaces such as these so that their actions and importantly, their speech, is noticeable as objecting to something. Tim Cresswell (1996) noted that activism relies upon a day-to-day ordinariness of, and expectations about, the regulation of urban landscapes in order for such regulation to be contested or disrupted. For example, people marching in the street or discursively objecting to auto-oriented transit change the dynamic of the street and
assumptions about transit space (for examples, see Henderson 2015 and Van Neste 2015 in Cidell and Prytherch 2015). It means something to disrupt spaces such as streets, whether physically or discursively because the disruption changes (however temporarily) the space or assumptions about space. Similarly, people camping in a park that usually closes at night are changing the use of that space, a strategy used by the Occupy movement in 2011. By pitching tents in public green spaces such as Zuccotti Park in New York, members of Occupy challenged the day-to-day understandings of, and rules about, how such space was meant to be used.

Urban politics, therefore, can be understood in respect of not only the city examined as a single territorial entity but also the diverse spaces within the city. Indeed, an important type of urban politics is the politics of place itself, or conflicts about the purpose and physical look of various spaces in the city. When the City of Seattle set out to redesign and rebuild several of its parks, for example, it faced vociferous opposition from youth who objected to the loss of a beloved skateboarding park facility in the planned renovations (Carr 2012). Subsequent to protests by skateboarding groups, the city tried to respond by incorporating new skate park spaces in its renovation plans, but then faced opposition from people who objected to the skateboarding and wanted parks oriented to other sorts of activities such as playground equipment for young children (Carr 2012). Thus, two visions of urban space emerged: one which celebrated skateboarding as a distinctive part of Seattle’s youth culture and identity; and one which sought more green space and a quieter and less trafficked city park environment. This particular conflict underlies the idea that different spaces in the city have different meanings for different groups of

Figure 3.1 Image of City Hall, Worcester, MA
Source: photo: Deborah Martin.
Place-based or place-positioned?

people; meanings that are signalled by design (layout, physical structure, etc.), by function or by use, and imposed differently by the people who live or spend time in an area.

Place imaginaries can be very powerful in motivating place-based conflict: Mark Purcell (2001) found that residents of part of Los Angeles had a ‘suburban ideal’ that was contradicted by the reality that some of their neighbours were transforming garages into residences for rental or use by relatives, such as parents-in-law. For these residents, and many people who live in other cities, the ideal of a residential neighbourhood means that the landscape should be dominated by single family homes that are used for residences exclusively, not offices or stores or even uses such as multi-family residential units. The predominant American suburban residential imaginary creates a landscape norm that people may measure landscapes against when looking at their own or other neighbourhoods (Purcell 2001).

Urban politics and place frames

These imagined and actual conflicts over place, which have at their core competing place imaginaries, highlight the role of ‘place frames’ in urban politics (Martin 2003). In many cities, people who live in the same residential areas often have little else in common; they may speak different languages, practice different religions (or no religion) and have very different household types. Yet, when they live in the same areas, they share spaces in those areas – sidewalks, streets, trees, parks – that foster shared concerns about their neighbourhoods. Shared concerns may include, for example, whether kids and youth in a neighbourhood have safe places to play and interact, whether the streets are clear of garbage, and whether trees are present and healthy along the sidewalks. These concerns may prompt organization among residents and, subsequently, claims for services from the city. Such claims are often articulated in terms of the particular geographical features of the neighbourhood itself, such descriptions of its green spaces, trees, or the characteristics of the residents or the architecture of many of their homes and apartment buildings. I have called these descriptions that reference the people, places and experiences of being in a given neighbourhood place frames because they describe the landscape ideals, or neighbourhood practices, that people seek or want to preserve in their shared spaces (Martin 2003).

Place frames capture a particular kind of urban politics in which the conflict itself is over different place imaginaries; and people collectively act to try to shape the outcome of the place conflict to satisfy their imaginaries and expectations. Residents mobilizing themselves and others to act with and to challenge city agencies for urban development and renewal use place-framing to describe the kind of neighbourhood they want to have (Martin 2003). Such descriptions can highlight elements such as historic housing, politically engaged residents, children looking for better and more parks, while also characterizing some of the threats to safety such as traffic or lack of programmes and jobs for youth in the area. Place frames can also be evident in what some people call NIMBY, or not-in-my-backyard, activism. When residents challenge new land uses that conflict with their ideals of a neighbourhood’s residential character, for example, or even residential land uses but which might serve a different group of residents (Duncan and Duncan 2001; Martin 2013a), they use place frames to characterize their place ideals and how they want the place to look and be experienced.

These examples of place frames suggest that they typify a type of urban politics which are exclusively about local neighbourhood conditions. Yet in any given case of neighbourhood politics, the underlying issues are not bound solely in the local place. The imaginaries that drive NIMBY politics are based in much broader ideologies about cities and neighbourhoods, and especially, residential neighbourhoods, as the case in Los Angeles investigated by Mark Purcell (2001) illustrates. Furthermore, it is not only imaginaries that underlie place politics and their
discursive place frames. Pierce et al. (2011) argue that investigation of place frames can point to and highlight the underlying broader geographies that shape places and engage place imaginaries. These multiple relations highlight that more than being place-based, such urban politics are place-positioned. That is, they situate (or position, via framing) places in relation to imaginaries, and to other places, both explicitly and implicitly. They provide the example of a hospital expansion in an Athens, Georgia, neighbourhood to illustrate the simultaneous local, regional and even global dynamics of place frames and place conflicts.

In the Athens case, a regional hospital seeking to position itself as the premier health care provider in its region sought expansion of its physical site, with plans to increase the hospital building footprint, supporting physical plant and surrounding surface parking (for further details, see Martin 2004). The hospital is located along a major commercial street, but also abuts the primarily single family residential land uses of a neighbourhood of Athens dubbed ‘Normal-town’, which derives its name from its proximity to the former ‘Normal’ teaching school, later used as a Navy Supply Corps School and, eventually, as a satellite campus – the Health Sciences campus – of the University of Georgia (also located in Athens). The residents of the areas around the hospital responded in a typically locally defensive style, objecting to the change in character of some of their neighbourhood to a more institutional landscape, and less residential one (Martin 2004). Their place frames offered discourse and imagery focused on the immediate locale, referencing the mostly modest, bungalow-style single-family homes in the area, the importance of pedestrian access, safety and daily practices, and the disproportionate size and scope of the proposed buildings and associated parking in the hospital’s proposed plan.

At first glance, the place politics at play were about who gets to define and shape the future production of a neighbourhood. But the questions of shaping (a local) place embed politics of broader spatial scales. The economics of health care in the United States, and in particular in north-east Georgia, shaped the hospital’s decision-making and expectations of its board (Pierce et al. 2011). The relatively non-urban character of the surrounding region and potential customer base shaped the planning and design of the hospital’s expansion, plans that imagined more suburban and rural landscaping and building layout than the more urban, albeit still relatively low-density, yet-pedestrian-friendly, landscape of the neighbourhood. Indeed, the town-feel of the neighbourhood also shaped an expectation of distance from commercial land uses, even as residents criticized the sprawling plan of the hospital’s building committee. All of the stakeholders engaged on both sides of the conflict employed discourses about the character of the city of Athens, and drew upon their networks with local and regional politicians, and in some cases, celebrities, to draw attention to and leverage pressure on the other side. The place politics were simultaneously about an approximately one-and-a-half square mile area of a neighbourhood, and about the economics shaping growth in general in the city. The residents pushed to negotiate the smallest detail of the hospital’s plan, seeking to preserve every individual house that they could and questioning the large scale of land use change, while the hospital officials made claims about the economic imperatives of growth and the need for Athens to preserve its health care industry. These claims prioritized competing territorial definitions of the conflict, which in turn shape the potential scale of conflict resolution, and the definition of who has power to decide the outcome.

A relational perspective on these place claims, however, would seek to connect even the most local framings to the underlying relations and dynamics that favour such a perspective. For residents of the neighbourhood where the hospital was located, their daily life experiences in the neighbourhood, the layout of the streets, presence of sidewalks and landscape of single family homes were what they prioritized. It is easy to read this framing as only about the local, and not attentive to regional economic needs and forces. Yet as Purcell (2001) noted in his analysis of
homeowners in Los Angeles, ideals about residential neighbourhoods do not arise spontaneously within such neighbourhoods. In the United States, a suburban ideal in particular, which prioritizes single family residences, a house with a yard, is pervasive in the popular imaginary (Jackson 1985). Connected to the ideal of a residential neighbourhood with single family homes – even in an urban neighbourhood of Athens, Georgia – there is an underlying economic market which values some residential landscapes more than others. The residents of Athens’ Normal-town neighbourhood have literally and figuratively invested in the lifestyle and imaginary that their one- and two-storey bungalow homes, nestled among small businesses and a large well-regarded hospital, enable and foster. They value their homes for the experiences that they have there, but they also value the investment that their homes represent. For them, a changed, larger, more sprawling hospital threatened the balance that enabled the neighbourhood to be thought of as a quiet, well-kept, residential area.

The hospital’s references to national trends in the health care industry and the need to grow in order to survive regionally were explicitly relational, and beyond the immediate local. Yet the underlying economic forces and pressures were in fact, represented in both imaginaries and claims. Further, as residents in the conflict pointed out (Martin 2004), the hospital’s particular understanding of itself conceptualized the local landscape very differently from the residents – both groups had very specific local imaginaries, or place frames, even as they invoked broader processes differently (or unevenly). For the hospital, the design needs focused on creating a ‘campus’ which had easy automobile access, large amounts of green space and engineered infrastructure – such as retaining water ponds – which tended to view the hospital’s site in isolation from the surrounding built environment. In other words, compatibility and aesthetic integration with the surrounding low-density and small-scale residential and retail landscapes simply were not part of the place imaginary in the initial hospital designs. The hospital, in its own way, had a very local, single-campus site mentality in its plans. The most explicit evidence of this single-site orientation, rather than one attending to the larger neighbourhood built environment, was the plan to build a storm water retention pond (on land where houses would have been razed to clear it). In the conflict, residents had opposed such an approach to storm water management as primarily a rural land use approach, rather than compatible with urban-oriented infrastructure (Soto 1999).

The urban politics in this case involved a host of variables, then, around who gets to define a site or place, and how that territory is imagined, and by whom. In the hospital–neighbourhood conflict, the principal self-defined stakeholders were the local residents, and the board of directors and management of the hospital. At the same time, local politicians and other leaders took sides, alternatively debating the economic imperatives of the region having a top-notch medical facility, and of the city to shape its neighbourhoods and built environment according to competing visions of livability. This case was ultimately an explicitly tangible, material, landscape-oriented conflict, but one with other ideals about urban space and the broader urban and regional economy, embedded within it.

**Place frames and social norms**

Many cases of urban politics engage explicit debates about the urban landscape, and what land uses are appropriate in which locations. Underlying these important place imaginaries and tangible landscape experiences, however, are also pernicious social contestations and tensions. Some urban politics engage more explicitly social relations, where the place politics are not so clear, despite being oriented around land use disputes. In my research in Massachusetts, for example (Martin 2013a, 2013b), I found that conflicts around the siting of social service agencies
highlighted the fact that many people prefer to think of addiction treatment or other life skills training as incompatible land uses within their residential neighbourhoods. Yet, for social service agencies and their clients, residential neighbourhoods are often the ideal locations for group homes for people struggling to overcome addiction or other life challenges which have sometimes led to or compounded problems of homelessness. These differing opinions about appropriate residential land uses are quintessential NIMBY disputes, and they centre quite explicitly on place, often expressed overtly very materially through land use.

Underlying the social discomforts of NIMBY are very much the same sort of place imaginaries as those which motivated the residents opposed to the hospital expansion in Athens that I have discussed above; namely, a place imaginary about residential neighbourhoods. But where the conflict with the hospital pitted a large institution with a significant physical infrastructure against mostly single family homes on modest yards, group-home-based social services occur in the same sort of single-family residences as typically exist in many American residential neighbourhoods. The physical infrastructure is not significantly different, and the underlying discomforts which generate a ‘not here’ type of reaction are related to social norms and perceptions. A group home might have more cars in the driveway at night, and a larger amount of garbage cans than the houses nearby on trash collection day, but the difference between it and neighbouring land uses isn’t really in the look of the building or how it fits on the street. The core difference between a social service residence and any other residence is the imputed differences in the residents themselves – differences imputed by the people who object to the social services.

Opposition to residential social services highlights the exclusionary aspect of any place imaginary; notions about what goes where also embed and draw upon ideas about who goes where (Cresswell 1996). As much as social exclusion may not be an intentional goal of someone engaged in a land use conflict, the underlying discomforts and concerns that drive the conflict are about difference, whether in land use or people, or both. One reason people worry about difference is the reliance that many homeowners have on the economic value of their property. In the United States, homeownership functions as a source of financial value as well as being a site for living; in other words, as a site for both exchange and use value (Logan and Molotch 1987). Since NIMBY is about the place politics of land use, it is also about expectations of reliability and predictability in land use that inhere in property values over time. When people express concerns about new or different land uses in their neighbourhoods, they sometimes explicitly reference property value. In the case of social services in Worcester and Framingham, Massachusetts, for example, residents explicitly identified concerns about a decline in their property values if social service group homes were located nearby (Martin 2013b).

As a result of the intensely local focus on property value and compatible or incompatible land uses for a particular area, NIMBY politics seem narrowly constructed around neighbourhood. But like the case of the hospital expansion in Athens, Georgia, social conflicts about place and belonging connect much broader processes and tensions to any ‘place-based’ concern. The reliance of individual households on their investments in housing situates them in the context of a broader set of social relations in which homeownership is a primary means of investment in the United States. Such a position in the economy – as a property owner – simultaneously situates at least a major part of their economic outlook at a local scale; homeowners attend to the very local land use dynamics of their neighbourhood because that is the setting of their property investment. At the same time, however, broader social and economic forces shape the process by which the combined challenges of addiction and homelessness are met through social service group housing – at least, in some states where laws and funding structures, such as those in Massachusetts, make such social services practical and feasible (Pierce and Martin 2017). A host of very complicated, multi-sited and multi-scalar processes combine to enmesh individuals into
drug or alcohol reliance and addiction, while a web of government and non-profit agencies exist to assist families and individuals with such personal, health and social challenges. These individuals, their problems and services to address them extend far beyond any one local or locally situated process, and yet, in the situation of a social service siting, they meet and manifest in the form of a local land use conflict.

Conclusions

The broader social, political and economic forces that occur across a wide range of places and neighbourhoods rarely enter into the debate about social service siting, except sometimes in the explicit call to elsewhere that the ‘not-here’ (put it someplace else) politics of NIMBY invokes. Urban politics, then, are always constituted through multiple places and spatial processes, and thus are really more ‘place-positioned’ than place-based.

Place-positioned politics, on the other hand, are urban politics that invoke or occur in specific sites, yet cannot truly be anchored to or fully solved within those sites, because the processes that produced them extend geographically within, beyond and through the places of the conflict. In their negotiation and resolutions, however, they often sit, fixed – however temporarily – into place-based situations in which they were made manifest through explicit conflict. The place-based conflicts of a neighbourhood where a hospital will, through one plan or another, expand its physical footprint, or where a social service will find a house in which to provide life skills and support to its resident-clients, are always place-positioned in particular sites, while simultaneously drawing upon relations and processes beyond those sites. Indeed, they draw upon formal and informal spaces of urban politics within the localities in which they are positioned: the formal sites of government; the informal spaces of negotiation; and the landscapes, buildings and settings of place-based conflicts. They may also draw upon, use or invoke other spaces, such as place imaginaries or material sites near to and far from the place of conflict.

Urban politics, then, invoke and engage multiple spaces. Conceptualizing place-based politics as place-positioned suggests a need to unravel the various and complicated spatial relations and processes that helped to situate a particular conflict in space, to expose multiple underlying spatialities. In doing so, alternative sorts of conflicts, relations and potential politics may emerge to form new sorts of urban politics, which can make explicit the place-positioning – or indeed, place-framing – underlying these old and new politics.

References


