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Growth, Politics, and the Stratification of Places¹

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Systematic inequalities among interdependent places are described here as a dimension of stratification of persons and organizations. The “stratification of places” is compared with the classic dimensions of class and status as a basis of collective action, and it is argued that the competition of places is a significant cause of the territorial differentiation of human communities.

This is an essay on the process of spatial differentiation of human communities. I argue that the differentiation of places implies sets of advantages and disadvantages for persons who are tied to each place and thus affects the chances for individual upward or downward mobility. A common response to this fact is a continuing collective effort to influence the pattern of development among places through political action. Places with early advantages, by making full political use of their superior resources, can potentially reinforce their relative position within the system of places. I hypothesize therefore that spatial differentiation tends to be transformed over time into an increasingly rigid stratification of places.

The study of the development of systems of places found its classical formulation in human ecology. By emphasizing the stratification aspect of spatial differentiation I am proposing a reorientation toward a more political human ecology, with spatial differentiation seen not only as the population’s natural selective response to its habitat but also as a means of organizing inequality.

I. HUMAN ECOLOGY: A CRITICAL NOTE

In this essay I develop an ecological dimension of stratification, taking into account the functional interdependence of systems of places. However, the present perspective contrasts in important ways with human ecology as developed by Park and his associates (see Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967), especially in my emphasis on the political determinants of territorial

¹ Paper presented in the session “Future of Human Ecology” at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1977. This essay extends an exchange with Harvey Molotch, some of whose formulations are incorporated here. For comments on earlier versions of the paper I am indebted to O. A. Collver, Lewis Coser, Paget Henry, and Moshe Semyonov.

differentiation. Zorbaugh ([1926] 1961) specifically discounted the sociological relevance of what he called administrative areas, as distinct from natural areas, and this distinction is carried over in Hawley (1950, pp. 258–59). Ecologists need not necessarily exclude political factors; McKenzie ([1926] 1961) in fact counted “political and administrative measures” among the “ecological factors” which shape the spatial relations among persons. Elsewhere (McKenzie 1933, pp. 158–70) he explicitly considered the competition among cities for favorable positions in an increasingly interdependent system of cities and such phenomena as local boosterism and conflicts over federal tax and expenditure policies. Yet even here McKenzie was primarily interested in the economic forces leading toward system integration, seeing political competition as a passing phenomenon, and as a rule human ecologists have ignored geopolitical units as corporate groups.

Whereas I stress the effects of collective action by communities in competition with one another, ecological theories of spatial differentiation have been based upon the analysis of the microeconomic competition of individual land users (Park 1936).

These differences are associated with a more basic divergence in perspective on the nature of community growth. The Chicago School sought explicitly to identify the processes of development at the “biotic level,” that is, those processes which manifest the response of the human population to the same constraints faced by all living populations. (On this point see the criticisms made by Alihan [1938], Hollingshead [1947], and Firey [1947].) The community was understood as an adaptive mechanism which maximizes the efficient use of space and other resources under the pressure of population growth (Hawley 1950, pp. 66–68).

Assuming free competition for space, resolved according to the relative marginal utility of particular locations for competing land users, ecologists of the Chicago School could assert that the final highly differentiated ordering of space would be the most effective for the population. Thus, in Park’s words, the process “results in the regulation of numbers, the distribution of vocations, putting every individual and every race into the particular niche where it will meet the least competition and contribute most to the life of the community” (Park 1952, p. 161). This perspective is complementary to the functionalist theory of class stratification, which is by now better known (Davis and Moore 1945). The similarity is visible in Hawley’s discussion of the stratification aspect of spatial differentiation, where political inequality among places is seen as a natural, system-maintaining consequence of differentiation:

A hierarchy of power relations emerges among differentiated units. Two consequences of differentiation contribute to that result. In the first place, inequality is an inevitable accompaniment of functional differentiation. Certain functions are by their nature more influential than others; they

are strategically placed in the division of labor and thus impinge directly upon a larger number of other functions. . . . Secondly, mutual supplementation through functional differentiation necessitates a centralization of control. To insure the regular operation of the system there must be a sufficient governing and coordinating power vested in some one function. [Hawley 1950, p. 221]

The point of my discussion of the competition of places is that persons and organizations constantly seek to affect the growth process in order to maintain or create inequalities among places to their own advantage. The consequent stratification of places is therefore constructed by political action. Political, social, and economic inequality among places should be understood not only as the *result* of differentiation, but also as a *cause* of the particular pattern of differentiation which evolves. More precisely, the competition among places normally reinforces the existing stratification, because initial advantages—translated into political power—can be maintained.

This hypothesis of increasing stratification of places resulting from political conflict can be explored in a wide variety of cases. I will present two examples here, one at the level of suburban communities in a metropolitan system, the other at the level of nations in the world system. In both cases there is evidence of increasing inequality in recent years.

The data on suburban inequalities are taken from the case of the 89 suburban communities in the Nassau-Suffolk SMSA (Long Island, N.Y.) which were reported in the census in both 1960 and 1970. The indicator of wealth is median family income, which is relevant to both the social status and the fiscal strength of the community. During the period 1960–70, the standard deviation of median incomes—one indicator of the degree of inequality among suburbs—more than doubled. Even with the 1970 value deflated to control for increases in the mean (due to both inflation and real increases in personal income), the standard deviation increased by 58.9%, from \$2,121 to \$3,370 (adjusted) in the 10-year period. Initial differences among suburbs were consolidated and reinforced as a result of the growth process of the 1960s. Elsewhere (Logan 1976) I have shown how such structural changes in the spatial differentiation of the metropolis can be understood in terms of the interaction between competition among potential land users for desirable locations and collective action by communities to promote favorable growth patterns.

The data on international stratification are based on the 88 countries for which information is provided by Banks's (1971) cross-polity survey for both 1956 and 1966. Here the indicator of wealth is gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, a measure of the total goods and services produced by the national economy. During 1956–66 the standard deviation of GDP per capita increased by 34.2%, from \$469 to \$580 (again controlling for

changes in the mean). In the section on international migration below, I apply to systems of countries the same theoretical logic by which I have treated systems of communities. At both geopolitical levels, the flow of goods and people among interdependent places affects the relative position of those places in a stratified order, creating the conditions for politicization of the development process.

II. THE BASES AND PROCESSES OF THE POLITICS OF PLACE

I have asserted that patterns of territorial differentiation can be understood as stratified systems reflecting the power relations among places. In the following sections I develop this proposition theoretically, considering the relationship between the stratification of places and other dimensions of social stratification, the modes of aggregation and expression of place-based interests, and the relationship of the stratification and competition of places to the social system in which they are embedded.

My purpose at this point is not to propose a theory of places, but rather to put forward as a general orienting concept the notion of places as collective actors.

Class, Status, and Place

The uses of spatial relationships to express the class and status differences among individuals are well known. Physical proximity often represents social similarity or intimacy in face-to-face interaction. Even whole cities have been shown to be structured partly according to this principle, as the degree of residential segregation of class and status groups is directly associated with differences in their social position (Duncan and Duncan 1955; Lieberman 1961; Guest and Weed 1976): "The urban neighborhood becomes a highly visible manifestation of the status structure, and individual occupational careers come to be mirrored in one's residential movements. A home is not just where you live; it is a location in a well developed status ecology and, inferentially, a telltale clue to one's location in the occupational hierarchy" (Laumann, Siegel, and Hodge 1970, p. 524; see also Barber 1957, pp. 144–46).

Residential segregation creates a status hierarchy of neighborhoods defined simply by the characteristics of their residents, at the same time as common class or status becomes a symbol through which people identify their physical area as a community. The status hierarchy of places is reinforced by people's individual decisions to translate upward social mobility into change of place of residence.

But the spatial organization of persons is more than a representation of class and status differences acquired by birth, education, etc. Place of

residence itself affects the chances for social rewards to the degree that persons are tied to the advantages and disadvantages of places—for example, opportunities of employment and housing, level of income, cost of living, public services and tax rates, and legal rights and obligations. Like class and status groupings, and more substantially than many other kinds of associations, places are “communities of fate” (Stinchcombe 1965). Among others in the study of community, Molotch (1967, pp. 336–37) has emphasized the notion that “once people of the metropolis relate themselves to a certain area, their fortunes and futures become dependent upon the fate of the geographical unit to which they have become attached.” More recently, Spilerman and Habib (1976) have shown that the stratification of types of communities reinforces the class stratification between established residents and recent migrants within Israeli society. This is not simply to argue the case for contextual effects (i.e., that one’s aspirations and behavior are constrained by interpersonal relations within closed, homogeneous communities). There are characteristics definable at the level of a place itself—consequences of the place’s economic and political relations with other places—which directly affect the quality of life and life chances of residents. Place is therefore a partially autonomous dimension of stratification in the same sense as the more familiar dimensions of class and status.

Competition of Places

It is because their fortunes are directly affected by the inequalities among places that persons and organizations continuously attempt to influence the development process through political action. Such action takes the form of efforts to determine the goals of local growth policies as well as competition among places to affect decision making at higher geopolitical levels. In either case, interests of place are commonly aggregated according to the territorial boundaries of politically defined places. Such boundaries bind together the many otherwise divergent elements within places, subjecting all within to significant characteristics of the geopolitical unit itself, the most fateful being its power in relation to other places. A “place” then is defined as much by its position in a particular web of political institutions (such as boundaries and constitutionally determined legal powers) as by the physical area it occupies. That is, whatever the inherent physical and population characteristics of naturally defined communities, these characteristics become resources and liabilities for residents according in part to the political organization of society.

Illustrations of this point are numerous. The concentration of employment in some suburban communities is a resource if public services are financed through local property taxes and if zoning can be used to externalize service burdens by forcing many local employees to live elsewhere.

Ghettoization in the metropolitan core is a liability to central cities if welfare costs are borne by the city; therefore urban-based individuals and groups have pressed hard for federal takeover of these costs. Discovery of oil in Alaska benefits that state if it can tax mineral resources, it benefits Chicago if the federal government can be made to mandate a Trans-Canadian Pipeline to distribute the oil to the Midwest, or it benefits California and Japan if oil companies are free to choose a more profitable Trans-Alaskan route. The great physical resources of Angola became a benefit to that territory only after decolonization, and production of commodities for export is being converted from a liability to a resource only to the degree that Third World countries organize effective international cartels.

In conflicts over boundaries, constitutional powers, allocations of public resources, taxation policies, land use controls, etc., places compete for development outcomes which would maintain or improve their relative position in the hierarchy of places. More precisely, coalitions of local interests—recruited and organized along territorial lines determined by political boundaries—compete for outcomes in which coalition partners have a mutual interest, even when at another level their interests may diverge. This is not to say that all internal groups have the same interest in development or that all are equally represented in the definition of local goals. A large research literature on local and national power structures suggests quite the opposite. My point here is that, by providing a communality of interests among internal groups, place accounts for political behavior which cannot be understood in terms of class conflict (e.g., the cooperation of banks, municipal unions, and city government to forestall bankruptcy of New York City). Granted that appeals to national patriotism or local pride are sometimes manipulated as ideological symbols to defuse internal conflict, people and organizations are in fact bound together by the places in which they live or have invested. To this extent it is meaningful to analyze the development process in terms of the competition of places.

Because places tend to be functionally differentiated from one another, it may be difficult to distinguish between those common interests of local persons and organizations which derive from *place* and those which derive from *economic sector*. “Downtown” and “the ghetto,” “Detroit” and “the Farm Belt” are all place designations which carry a clear functional connotation. The fortunes of almost everyone in Detroit, for example, depend upon the fortunes of the automobile industry. Probably the common interests of Detroiters are more powerfully represented by General Motors than by the Detroit city government. Thus the competition of places is closely tied to intersectoral conflicts which are channeled through major business or labor organizations. In principle, however, these are two quite different bases of political action. Intersectoral conflicts correspond to the interest

group politics traditionally studied in political science. They become relevant to the competition of places insofar as (1) they affect spatial differentiation, (2) they become understood and acted upon as issues of place, or (3) the definition of local interests is imposed by the organization which controls the local economy, so that local government becomes an instrument of intersectoral conflict.

Social Movements of Place

I have argued that systems of place become ordered partly as a result of competition among places which represents really the search for locational advantages by persons and organizations. That is, the growth process is an interaction of social movements, protecting territory or advancing claims for collective advantage, simultaneously within and among communities (see Molotch [1976, p. 311] and Harvey [1973, pp. 72–73], for statements of a similar position).

The shifting coalitions of political actors referred to here have at least some of the characteristics of social movements even when they do not involve public mobilization. The most important in my view is that the diverse members of these coalitions act to promote the *collective* good in which they share. Sometimes, nonetheless, issues of the competition of place give rise to or reinforce broad popular movements. In these cases the movements are strengthened by the normal overlap of stratification of place with the geographic segregation of persons by class and status. The development process which causes places to be differentiated from one another on the bases of class and status has consequences for the actualization of these classic bases of collective action. Place may so overlap with class and status (race, religion, culture, language) that it may provide an ecological support for organization as well as a symbolic sense of community, at the same time as being itself an objective basis for common action. Berry et al. (1976), noting the common use of place of residence to support the “status claims” of individuals, use this fact to explain the frequency and intensity of solidarity action by community residents in opposition to racial integration. Similar reasoning could be applied to movements against busing between white and black neighborhoods or to apartment construction in single-family areas. Blauner (1969) attributes ghetto revolt to a corresponding protest in the black community against external exploitation and containment in the central city. At another geographic level, the best-known recent examples of violent regional nationalism (as in Northern Ireland, Biafra, and the Basque region of Spain) have resulted from a sense of central government exploitation of places which have a distinct language, culture, religion, and/or economic structure, and much the same may be said for colonial independence movements (see Hechter 1975).

Migration: Individual Mobility in the System of Places

Social movements of place occur to the degree that persons and organizations identify their interests with the future development of the places with which they are associated. There are alternative individual responses to the stratification of places, by which persons seek to manipulate the inequalities among places to their own advantage. Studies of the international system, for example, have long recognized that part of the stability of dependency relationships is due to the cooperation of persons in dependent countries who are able to adapt their interests to continued foreign domination (Baran 1968, pp. 194–96). Perhaps more commonly, residents of disadvantaged places perceive migration as the most effective means of upward mobility.

The phenomenon of migration is especially interesting theoretically because it involves the stratification of both individuals and places and the interaction that occurs on both the individual and the community level in the search for advantages of place. From the perspective of free-market theories of population movement (e.g., Tiebout 1956) migration would minimize the disparities among places as the distribution of persons came to match the distribution of resources. But of course migration is not free. Whether by residential zoning policies or police control of their borders, places regulate migration according to their own interest, and individual efforts to move upward through migration may actually be made to reinforce the system of inequalities among places. Thus the stratification of places can be maintained not only by the outcomes of conflicts among places but also by the ways in which noncollective responses are structured.

Consider the example of migration of workers between the industrial countries of the Common Market and the less-developed Mediterranean countries in the postwar period. First, migrants in this system are assigned social and legal status inferior to that of native workers. Their presence (given full employment) provides a relative class and status advantage to natives, increasing the chances of upward mobility for them and defusing native class militancy (Castles and Kosack 1973). Emigration in turn makes available a nonpolitical response to economic discontent in disadvantaged places (MacDonald 1963). Migration complicates individuals' perceptions of the lines of stratification within and between places and reduces potential opposition to the system as a whole. Second, the division of labor by which some places provide worker reserves for others can be manipulated to the advantage of the latter. Migration can guarantee a sufficient work force to an expanding economy and allow externalization of the political and economic costs of unemployment in periods of contraction; both processes can reinforce the initial division of labor (Castells 1975).

Systems of Places: Levels of Analysis

The notion of competition of places is applicable to systems of places at any geopolitical level—to systems of neighborhoods, cities, regions, and nations. It reflects the fact that within any system (whether the Western world order described by Wallerstein [1974], or the New York metropolis analyzed by Wood [1961]) the growth potential of places is affected by their political-economic position in relation to other places.

Despite their similarities, there are important differences among levels. One is the strength of the political institutions which integrate the systems and the degree of sovereignty of the places within them. The nation-state is clearly the strongest political unit in much of the modern world, determining by law the formal channels of competition of places within the national system, while conflict among nations is only loosely regulated by international structures. The smallest geopolitical units—administrative areas within cities, for example—have the least sovereignty but are the most homogeneous in terms of the interests they must serve.

But beyond comparing these levels as parallel systems of places, it is crucial to discern the ways in which they are interrelated. Systems of neighborhoods are nested within systems of cities within systems of nations. The political process within any system involves not only local places but also interests which are organized at the system level. The latter groups—especially those at the national level—can greatly influence the pattern of interlocal competition by setting the legal framework within which it occurs (see Holden [1964] and Farkas [1971] for discussions of the effects of federal law on interlocal conflict in the United States).

Using a Marxian perspective, some theorists have suggested that the inequalities among places are most relevant, not for their effects on interests based within competing places, but for their consequences for the maintenance of the system as a whole. In his study of migratory labor systems, for example, Burawoy notes that the geographic separation of the sites of renewal and maintenance of the labor force—made possible by the unequal power relations among places—makes possible a reduction in the total costs of reproduction of the labor force. “It is cheaper to educate and bring up a family, and so forth, in a Bantustan or a Mexican shantytown than in Johannesburg or California, where the reproduction of labor power is organized for higher-income groups and where, as a result, lower-income groups are penalized” (Burawoy 1976, p. 1082).

Harvey (1973, pp. 261–84) has made a much broader claim for the role of stratification of places in maintaining capitalism. Describing the spatial ordering of Western capitalism as a global structure in which the industrial metropolis rests at the top of a chain of exploitation of places, he argues

that such a hierarchical organization of territories has been necessary for the concentration and efficient circulation of surplus value. The particular geographic pattern depends upon both economic and political factors of the type discussed in this essay:

The exhaustion of a key resource and the opening up of new resources (through technology or the opening up of new trade routes) can bring about rapid shifts in the circulation of surplus and bring powerful and important cities into being, and can just as quickly destroy them . . . In contemporary times, the shifting allegiance of nations, the interdiction of trade through political action (the partition of Germany, the closure of the Suez Canal) have all affected circulation of surplus. Competition between cities, between sets of cities (such as the Hanse) or between countries, for control over the circulation of surplus will itself alter the geographic pattern of circulation as one side dominates the other . . . [Harvey 1973, p. 247]

But Harvey is less interested in the particular geographic pattern than in the fact of territorial inequality itself.

Like other recent theorists, he emphasizes the increasing role of the state in preserving this system: by protecting the continued flow of surplus through military and police control, by assuming responsibility for the provision of facilities and services for the maintenance of the population and reproduction of the labor force, and by providing infrastructural support and financing for the profitable expansion of private industry. As others have pointed out, there are potential contradictions in these roles, because costs of social control are inherently unproductive expenses and because state revenues cannot keep up with expenditures as long as profit is privately appropriated. O'Connor (1973) and Castells (1972) have suggested that the interrelated fiscal crises and urban political movements which result from these contradictions jeopardize the system itself. On the contrary, I would point to other characteristics of the political organization of the stratification of places which tend to insulate it from such challenges:

1. Governmental fragmentation enables public resources to be concentrated in certain jurisdictions. Thus the fiscal crisis, because it is unequally distributed both within and across metropolitan regions, affects various economic sectors and social classes differentially.

2. Potential opposition to the system tends to become organized within places rather than at the system level. Such action is relatively ineffectual, because disadvantaged places have neither the internal resources nor the power in relation to other places to resolve the problems which generated their political activity.

III. CONCLUSION

At every geographic level the competition of places affects the pattern of development and differentiation of the human community. Spatial differentiation does in practice imply inequalities among places, and thereby advantages and disadvantages to the persons and organizations whose fortunes are linked to specific places. The more powerful of these actors typically established political structures which reinforce the stratification of places to their own advantage. The routine working of such structures insulates the system from challenge. It is rare that places disadvantaged by the system can oppose it directly, as the OPEC countries have done temporarily within the world system. And opposition from within advantaged places is muted by the fact that the advantages of place are widely shared by its residents.

I have suggested that place is often an important basis of collective action and that the notion of stratification of places can usefully supplement the more traditional dimensions of class and status. The interactions among these three dimensions provide a rich field for theoretical development.

I have also argued that in order to understand how growth takes place and is socially ordered, one must take into account the conscious efforts of places to influence growth. This approach does not deny the ecological variables of distance and time, but asserts the importance of another political set of variables. It does no more than make positive use of what the Chicago School also recognized (Park 1936; Wirth 1945; Hawley 1950, pp. 55–63; and esp. Hawley 1971, pp. 49–54) but seems too often to have neglected, that the human community itself more than any other life form creates the conditions of its own development.

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