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The Failure of Urban Problem Solving

In the 1960s urban problems gained a special place on the American public agenda. The city was said to be in crisis and urban problems were considered by many to be the most critical problems of American society.

On 15 August 1966, Senator Abraham Ribicoff launched a Senate inquiry into the state of urban government with these words: "the crisis of our cities is the crisis of the modern United States. Seventy percent of all Americans now live in or close to cities. The number grows each year. So the fate of the city and the future of our country are one and the same thing."¹ Speaking on the same day, Senator Robert Kennedy added that "the [urban] problem is the largest we have ever known. And we confront an urban wilderness more formidable and resistant and in some ways more frightening than the wilderness faced by the pilgrims or the pioneers."² These words set the tone. The rhetoric of crisis and concern filled the Senate chamber where the Ribicoff subcommittee was meeting for thirty-three days, and it filled 4,437 pages in twenty volumes.³

The background of the urban crisis is by now familiar. Michael Harrington's widely read book *The Other America* focused new attention on city slums and their impoverished inhabitants.⁴ The civil-rights movement heightened concern for the black urban poor, and widespread rioting and racial conflict deepened the sense of urban crisis.⁵

In response to these events, governments at all levels developed a great number of new urban programs and policies. The federal government led the way. In the war on poverty and later in the model cities program, the Johnson administration fired program after program at the elusive problems of urban education, housing, health, and community development.⁶

One result of this federal activity was a sharp rise in public expenditures for urban programs. Between 1965 and 1972 federal spending for education and manpower, housing, health, and welfare increased almost six times.⁷ City budgets showed equally sharp increases.⁸ In New York City the expense budget rose from \$3.4 billion in 1964–65 to \$9.1 billion in 1971–72. Nor, despite popular mythology, was New York an unusually prodigal urban child. In Seattle the expense budget rose from \$36.3 million in 1960 to \$80.9 million in 1970. In Philadelphia the dollar increase in the expense

budget was from \$202.3 million in 1960 to \$446.3 million in 1971. And in Los Angeles the expense budget leaped from \$116.4 million in 1960 to \$353.5 million in 1970.

Put in more general terms, the five cities with a 1960 population of a million or more on average increased their spending levels from \$148.66 per capita in 1960 to \$410.04 per capita in 1970. The seventeen cities with a 1960 population of between 500,000 and a million had an average spending increase from \$111.28 per capita in 1960 to \$240.01 in 1970. And the twenty-one cities with a 1960 population between 300,000 and 500,000 increased their average spending from \$80.45 per capita in 1960 to \$178.33 in 1970.

Although New York City was the biggest spender, with a three-fold increase in per capita spending during the 1960s, the forty-two next largest cities were not far behind. The twenty-one other cities with 500,000 or more in population increased their spending on average almost two and a half times, and the twenty-one cities with a population of between 300,000 and 500,000 more than doubled their per capita spending in the 1960s.

Despite the proliferation of programs and expenditures, solutions to urban problems were not forthcoming. Within five years of their inception urban problem-solving strategies were increasingly viewed as ineffective or misguided. Many conservatives believed that public money had been wastefully spent. Liberals and radicals often said that not enough money had been spent. Both agreed that urban problems had hardly been dented by the new public programs.

Within five years the brief era of innovation and experimentation in urban problem solving had come to an end, leaving the wreckage of many hopeful programs and policies. But what caused the wreckage? Why were city governments from New York to Los Angeles so unsuccessful in their efforts to solve the urban crisis? Why did so many programs, policies, and attempts to restructure city government prove so disappointing that they were gradually terminated or replaced by yet another batch of hopeful solutions? Why were the infusions of new ideas, resources, and personnel so clearly inadequate to the task of improving the governance of cities?

Very different answers have been given to these questions. One answer is that the war on poverty was a “phony war” fought with totally inadequate resources. Another is that public concern with urban problems dissipated in the face of other crises—Vietnam, the environment, energy, and Watergate. A third, iconoclastic answer offered by Edward Banfield in *The Unheavenly City* is that, given the incorrigible behavior of the lower-class urban poor, it is virtually impossible to improve urban conditions through public policy, however creative.⁹

Whatever the failure of previous urban solutions, the problems that they addressed are still present. The urban crisis may have faded from public attention, but it is alive on the streets and in the neighborhoods of American cities. Urban problems have the distinctive characteristic of being persistent, ordinary, and seemingly intractable.

In 1975 a survey of mayors turned up bleak appraisals of the state of the city. According to Mayor Kenneth Gibson of Newark, “Unfortunately, due to inflation, recession/depression, cutbacks in anticipated State aid to education, shrinking revenues and a general rise in cost of government, we have had to limit services to the point of absolute need.”¹⁰ And Mayor Lawrence Cohen of St. Paul, Minnesota, had this to say: “Like most major American cities, St. Paul can no longer finance the ever-increasing cost of essential municipal services with already overstrained . . . revenue sources. In Minnesota, we call it municipal overburden.”¹¹

A recent study concerned with urban fiscal problems asks, “Can cities survive?”¹² Many cities are laying off policemen and teachers, and prophecies of municipal bankruptcy are no longer merely rhetorical. The experience of New York City makes that plain.

Faced with this frustrating experience, urban policy analysts and students of urban government must carefully reconsider the way they think about urban problems and policies. The question is: How can we best analyze urban problems?

One response, which no longer seems useful, is to recite the litany of urban crisis—to document once more the dimensions of poverty, crime, and housing deterioration and then lament the failures of policemen, teachers, and other urban administrators in

dealing with these problems. Another response, which reflects the frustration of many urban activists, is to conclude that in a society characterized by racism, or income inequality, or for that matter by an “unresponsive” federal government, nothing much can be done about urban policy problems. If urban policy making is decisively *determined* by these larger, national forces, the urban poor will stay poor and powerless—unless, of course, the system is drastically transformed. If this view is correct, the city is an irrelevancy, which makes it pointless to talk about urban policy making. However it is impossible to confirm or disconfirm this thesis here. We can only acknowledge it and its significance and move on. A third strategy is that of the policy analyst who searches for immediate answers to particular urban problems. Here the attempt is made to determine whether a particular welfare, housing, or education policy is more effective and less costly than some alternative policy. This is the strategy followed by many economists and systems analysts, program budgeters, and other practitioners of “rational analysis” who gained prominence throughout the government (and in some cities) in the 1960s.¹³

This book follows a very different strategy. Its subject is urban government. Its premise is that the failure of urban problem solving can be found in the nature and structure of city government. It is perhaps not surprising that a political scientist should look for his answers in familiar turf, the structure and working of government. But there are also less subjective reasons for examining urban problem solving through the prism of city government.

It is city government that manages police work and classroom teaching. It is city hall, along with its police, fire, and sanitation employees, that implements social policies and delivers concrete services. It is the job of city government to deal directly with citizens on a daily basis. City employees are the foot soldiers of American government; some would say they are the “dirty workers.” Any education policy designed in Washington, D.C., depends heavily on the behavior of particular teachers in particular urban classrooms. A new criminal justice policy will have an impact at the street level (where crimes occur) only if it effectively manages to regulate or change the conduct of individual policemen.

This book makes a simple argument: given its present political organization and decision-making processes, the city is fundamentally ungovernable. By ungovernable I mean that the urban policy-making system is incapable of producing coherent decisions, developing effective policies, or implementing state or federal programs. This means that even if the state or the federal government were to commit large-scale fiscal resources—as they did in the 1960s—it is unlikely that the funds would solve urban problems. It is likely, by contrast, that the policies and programs devised by higher-level government would either never reach their targets at the street level or that they would be completely twisted out of shape or splintered by the time they reached the citizens for whom they were designed.

The implications of this assertion are very serious. If city government provides the foundations for American social policy and if those foundations are shaky (or perhaps crumbling), then the prospects for national programs and policies cannot be very bright. According to this view city government is out of control because it lacks control in its policy making and administration. It is like a ship without a rudder, or perhaps with a hundred rudders pushing it in different directions.

To say that the city is ungovernable is a strong and possibly even a rash claim. It is not a new one. For example, in 1888 James Bryce wrote that “there is no denying that the government of the cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States.”¹⁴ However, it is certainly a debatable claim, and one that can be easily misunderstood. It is therefore crucial to make clear at the outset what I mean and do not mean in saying that the city is ungovernable. I do not mean to say that the problem of urban government is primarily one of evil, stupid, or corrupt political leadership. This may have been true once in some cities, but the days of Boss Tweed, Frank Hague, and other old-style machine pirates are generally over.¹⁵ Chicago has been run by a stubborn, old-fashioned machine, but whatever the exact character of Richard Daley’s regime, its notoriety clearly springs from the fact that it is so rare. More important, I am emphatically not saying that the city is ungovernable primarily because it does not have enough money or has too many poor peo-

ple. Life in urban America would certainly be more pleasant if both the city and its citizens had far greater economic resources; but the lack of money is not, in my view, what prevents city government from governing effectively.

The Central Argument

There is no profit in trying to pin the blame for the city's problems on a scapegoat: the "disorganized" poor or the "racists" in working-class neighborhoods or the bankers or the universities or the public service unions or the brutal policemen. Rather the incapacity of urban government is a product of the city's basic political and social organization and of the nature of the services that it provides.

I do not seek to apologize for or vilify urban policy makers. I wish to explain why city policy makers have been unable to govern effectively. I do not believe that city government is hopeless, but I will not offer instant, miracle solutions either. More precisely, in saying that the city is ungovernable I mean to say that

- the city is too decentralized to permit coherent planning and policy making;
- it is too centralized to support a responsive, flexible relationship between what Albert Reiss calls "the servers and the served in service delivery;"¹⁶
- it is too dependent on higher-level governments to take strong, independent policy initiatives; and
- it is too independent of higher-level government to ensure competence, control, and fairness in the implementation of national programs.

Viewed in another light, the city can be said to be ungovernable because the principal actors in it have so little control over its governance. That is,

- to a large extent the mayor does not control his bureaucracies and administrators;
- to a large extent high-level administrators do not control their street-level bureaucrats: the teachers, firemen, and policemen who deliver services at the street level;¹⁷ and

- citizens and citizen groups have little control over policy making, however strong and frequent their demands. Additionally citizens find that participation in urban policy making carries high costs and elusive benefits.

Finally, the city can be said to be ungovernable because

- Its problems arise from the city's special function: direct, personal service delivery at the street level—when street-level service delivery issues involve trust, responsiveness, and authority relations between the servers and the served. Thus service problems involve intricately related social, psychological, and political components. They are not simply economic problems that can be solved by the efficient allocation of greater fiscal resources.
- Some of the city's problems are impossible to avoid and solve as long as the city performs its historical function of absorbing the newest, poorest immigrants and managing the ensuing community conflict among different groups in a melting pot that, as Daniel Moynihan and Nathan Glazer have argued, does not melt.¹⁸
- No city government has ever figured out how to solve some of its enduring policy problems. We do not know how to stop street crime or drug addiction or how to improve the reading levels of low-income children.

The Urban Jigsaw Puzzle: The Problem of Fragmentation

To suggest that the city is ungovernable for these reasons is only to offer a description of the major obstacles to successful urban policy making. It is more important to ask why these obstacles arise. Why is urban government a jigsaw puzzle that few people ever seem able to put together? What we need is a persuasive explanation of why urban management and policy making are such a frustrating business.

City government is an intractable jigsaw puzzle because of the inherent fragmentation of urban service delivery and the historical fragmentation of urban policy-making processes. At first glance this explanation may seem familiar, even obvious; urban observers have been talking about the fragmentation of the city for a long time. To take only one example, Robert Fogelson called his study

of Los Angeles *Fragmented Metropolis*,¹⁹ and urban politicians of all stripes, from reformers to machine bosses, have struggled to bring political or managerial order to the fragmented city. So there can be no claim to the notion of originality in the simple mention of fragmentation. However, what has been lacking in urban analysis, political or otherwise, is a systematic examination of the sources, manifestations, and implications of urban fragmentation.

What I hope to do is to demonstrate the explanatory power of the concept of fragmentation when it is broken down into its many different but interacting elements. I will do this not by describing the formal structure of urban government but by looking at the city as a policy-making system, as a complex organization trying to solve particular problems. This involves an attempt to look inside the "black box" of urban policy making to see how problems arise from the street level and how they are channeled and dealt with in the city's decision-making networks. In particular this approach involves studying the policy-making process from the perspective of different political actors—mayors, top-level administrators, street-level bureaucrats, businessmen, neighborhood groups, public unions. Thus I seek to present an interior view of urban policy making by portraying the choices and dilemmas that political participants face. In this sense my argument builds on Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman's *Governing New York City*.²⁰ Sayre and Kaufman argued that urban politics is best viewed as a struggle between many different contestants for the "stakes of the game." But what kind of struggle, and how are the contestants armed? And how is the nature of the struggle and the contestants' strategies shaped by the defining characteristics of urban politics? In another well-known study Norton Long describes local politics as an "ecology of games."²¹ This is true as far as it goes. But what are the different "ecologies" of urban government, and how are the various games played in the urban policy-making process?

In recent political analysis the black box of urban policy making has been left unopened. Lately, to be sure, there has been much discussion of public policy, policy making, and decision making, but the meaning and significance of a public policy approach has not been clearly stated.

Does focus on the policy-making process amount to anything? I believe it does. It means that decision processes explain in important ways the outcomes of decision. Political analysts have long looked to the idea of process as a powerful way of explaining the workings of government. But they have not always underscored the theoretical reason for dwelling on process. That reason must be that the form of policy making decisively shapes the content of policy outcomes. Translated into the urban context, this means that urban policy is unresponsive, unstable, erratic, severely fragmented, and often ineffectual because policy making has these same characteristics. To put it in the simplest possible terms, policy cannot be effective policy without effective policy decisions.

Taking a policy-making approach to urban government leads to two sorts of questions. First are questions about the processes of policy making. How do citizens express their demands for urban services and to whom? How are these demands aggregated (if at all)? What kind of communication exists between those who receive services and those who deliver them? How does the agenda of urban problem solving get set? How stable or unstable is the network of decision making and the configuration of decision makers? Are decisions made at any point, or do they bounce about continuously from decision point to decision point? Once a decision is made, how many decision points are there in the process of implementation? In calling the city ungovernable I am saying that the city's decision routes constitute a maze, and an unstable one at that.

Second are questions about the substance of the policy-making process—questions about the nature of urban problems and the way problems and policies travel along the city's decision networks. How rapidly are problems and demands generated? How does the "clearance rate" for existing problems compare with the entry rate for new problems? Are the demands and problems varied or recurrent, predictable or erratic? Are problem situations clearly defined or highly ambiguous? Is the decision-making process itself coherent or fragmented?

These are the kinds of questions that I believe must be explored if we wish to understand how urban policy making operates. In

many cases the questions may seem routine and the answers obvious. But these are not the questions that have motivated and guided urban political analysis in the last generation.

Beyond Community Power

For almost two decades urban political analysis has been dominated by the community power debate. The central question in the debate is: Who governs²² the city? Is it a power elite in corporate boardrooms or an executive-centered coalition²³ in city hall, or warring sovereignties,²⁴ or political machines or public unions, or possibly even organized crime? Academic detectives have shown an almost insatiable appetite for finding new and seemingly better answers to this mystery. Nevertheless two main positions persist. One is the power elite conception originally associated with Floyd Hunter's study of Atlanta.²⁵ The other is the pluralist conception originally associated with Robert Dahl's study of New Haven. In the wake of these studies political analysts have devoted enormous time and energy to the task of appraising and defining the arguments made by the power elite and pluralist schools. Without question the community power debate has made an important contribution in stimulating urban analysis, but the concerns of the debate are not ours here.

I will avoid the community power controversy for two main reasons. First, both sides of the debate are obsessed with the distribution of power and seem to assume that there is a simple relationship between the distribution of power and the process of decision making. By contrast my concern is with how different policy-making processes channel and constrain the exercise of power. Thus, to say that *x* holds *y* amount of power is not to give an adequate account of how he uses or fails to use that power to influence or control a particular decision. More precisely I will show that given the complexity of decision routes and networks and the great diversity of decision contexts, the exercise of power is a complicated transaction involving many different political resources and strategies, and various constraints and costs. Power is not mechanically related to policy making. To exercise power is not merely to press a button and make a decision happen. Lying be-

tween power and decision, and defining their relationship, are the intricate routes and networks of the policy-making process.

The mechanical, self-actuating view of power is close to what Floyd Hunter is talking about in *Community Political Structure*.²⁶ His power elite is able to get what it wants. If it could not, it would not be a power elite. If we had good reason to believe that the power elite view accurately characterized urban government in most of our large cities, my emphasis on the urban policy-making process would be unjustified. It would only be complicating a simple matter. As it turns out, however, strong evidence to support the conception that a city is controlled by a command-giving power elite simply has not emerged.

A second reason why I will avoid the community power debate is that most of the analysis that it has produced presents a static picture of urban politics. Both power elite and pluralist theorists leave us with a single, fixed taxonomy of power and decision making. A power elite is a power elite. That is all we need to know if our concern is to describe power relations and, by inference, the structure and health of democratic government. But it is not enough if we are concerned with urban problem solving—with the way urban government responds to different pressures and problems. It is hard to believe that knowing whether a city government has a pluralist or elitist power structure tells us much, if anything, about the way the government deals with busing conflicts, union strikes, street crime, health service delivery, and garbage collection. Community power analysis may show who is instrumental in making decisions but not how they make decisions, what decisions they make, and how effective (or ineffective) their decisions are in dealing with different urban problems.

Comparative Urban Politics

Another important strand of urban political research in recent years has focused on the comparative analysis of American cities. Various writings have tried to categorize and classify different urban political structures and policy-making processes.²⁷ There are accounts of “caretaker” governments,²⁸ “amenity producing” governments,²⁹ and “fused polyethnic” governments.³⁰ In addition

studies of urban politics have traditionally emphasized the differences between mayor-council and city-manager forms of government, strong mayor and weak mayor forms, and machine and reform governments.³¹

The trouble with the comparative approach is that for all the differences and similarities it uncovers, it tells little about the basic character of urban government. We want to know here what is distinctive about the urban policy-making process. And to do this, we need to compare the urban system with other kinds of policy-making systems; the obvious point of comparison is with state and national governments.

Urban Systems Analysis: The Inputs and Outputs of City Government

There is yet another mode of analyzing city (and state) government that has recently achieved prominence but that also pays very little attention to what is inside the black box of urban policy making. This approach is usually called systems analysis and draws on David Easton's conception of the "political system."³² In the system's framework inputs of various sorts go into a black box (which is the policy-making process) and outputs in the form of policies, and expenditures (in general, "authoritative allocations") come out. Applied to state and local governments, this approach has generated many elaborate statistical studies of (1) how socioeconomic differences affect government policies (on the input side) and (2) how governments spend their money and how expenditures differ, between programs and over time (on the output side). The intent of these analyses is to relate input to output and thus to explain why government produces what it does.

Unfortunately analysis of this sort tends to beg basic questions about how urban governments go about making policy choices. Thomas Dye, for example, assesses the primacy of socioeconomic conditions in state government and has no compelling reason to look into the policy-making process.³³ His argument is that the significant differences between Mississippi and New York are economic and that policy making is an epiphenomenon that is controlled by the state's socioeconomic environment. Other writers,

most notably J. Patrick Crecine, pay meticulous attention to the pattern of budget expenditures in urban governments.³⁴ But, like Dye, Crecine presents a deterministic model that makes urban policy making a relatively mechanical operation. Dye's determinism is straightforward; he asserts that economic factors largely determine governmental policy making. Crecine's determinism is more subtle. It results from defining urban policy outputs in terms of budgetary expenditures. In Crecine's view one understands urban policy making by seeing what government spends its money on and how much it spends. At first glance this does not seem to be an unreasonable approach; government budgets obviously reveal a great deal about what a government is doing in its programs and policies. They not only capture the range of government activities, they also capture the relative allocation of financial resources between departments or programs and, with that, the development and decline of particular programs.

However, the budget provides only an introduction to urban policy analysis. All it tells about government activities is that there are large and critically important areas of urban policy making that it does not illuminate at all. In the first place, the fact that a government spends x amount of money in a department often does not reveal the nature or meaning of programs that the department is, in fact, running. A police department may spend x amount on (1) new plainclothes detectives (designed to reduce street crime), or (2) new traffic cops, or (3) new shoe-fly investigators (designed to reduce corruption in the department). The policy significance of the three expenditures would obviously vary considerably, but, as long as the amounts are the same, the choice of one policy will look the same as any other in aggregate budget expenditures.

Urban Policy Making: An Overview

I have spent considerable time appraising existing approaches to urban policy making to show both the limitations of these approaches and the important questions that they ignore. What is my approach? I have said that I will emphasize the process by which decisions are made and that, more precisely, policy-making processes powerfully determine the substance of policy. But what de-

termines the nature of urban policy making? The answer is found in the structure of urban government, which is defined by the central process of city government: the demand for a supply of urban services.

I will show in chapter 2 that this structure is deeply fragmented because of the character of urban services. The argument of this book is thus anchored in a *structural* analysis of what makes the city a distinctive political system, indeed, an intractable political jigsaw puzzle. However, it is not enough to describe the structural foundations of urban policy making. We also want to know what problems city government faces and how it goes about dealing with them. To do this, we need first to analyze the character of urban problems. In doing so, we must avoid the familiar trap of seeing only the present conditions. The failing of much of the urban crisis literature is that it does not distinguish between the capacities of city hall to solve different problems and it gives no historical perspective on urban problem solving. By contrast, how has the problem-solving capacity of urban government developed? What has the city successfully dealt with? What problems have constantly eluded it?

What accounts for the differential performance in problem solving? In chapter 3, I will present a developmental analysis of how urban government has evolved as urban policy makers faced different problems and sought to establish an effective system of governance.

Having examined the structure of urban government and the nature of urban problems, I am in a position to analyze the structure of urban policy making. In chapter 4, I consider what the policy-making and problem-solving process looks like to a central policy maker in city hall. I postulate the existence of a central policy maker who has to sort out and respond to the full range of urban demands and problems. This hypothetical policy maker bears some resemblance to the mayor of a large city, but he is not exactly like a mayor, for he is able to see the workings of the entire policy-making, problem-solving system, and, of course, no actual urban decision maker has this kind of overview. (Many problems and decisions simply do not reach the mayor.) What is involved is the construction of an analytical model of problem generation and

agenda setting in the city. The point of the model is to emphasize the uncertainty and instability of urban policy making. Because problems and demands come into the urban policy-making system in an almost infinite number of permutations and combinations, there can be no such thing as one simple model of urban decision making. Urban policy problems differ according to the nature of the problem, the issue context, the stage of decision, the configuration of participants, the institutional setting, and the governmental function involved.

I am concerned with urban government as a policy-making system, and thus with the kinds of problems a policy maker faces and the way he reacts to them. The crux of the argument is that urban policy making is itself fragmented and unstable. Most especially, it is reactive; urban policy makers are constantly rushing from one small crisis to another. In their reactivism they bounce from one hopeful policy response to another, constantly remake and undo decisions, and often search blindly for some solution that will work. Thus a central argument of this book is that the urban policy-making system, because of its reactivism and instability, is different from other policy-making systems, and this difference springs from the fragmented structure of urban government and from the nature of the policy problems that city governments must deal with. In chapter 5, I will move beyond an analysis of the variability and instability of urban policy making to show what makes some urban issues more difficult than others and others almost impossible to manage. In this analysis I again take the perspective of the central policy maker and attempt to illuminate the central elements that distinguish relatively easy problems from hard and virtually intractable ones.

Having constructed a conceptual model of the city's policy-making process, I will examine the way different political actors operate in and react to the policy-making process. What are the political resources and strategies that mayors employ in trying to shape urban policy? What are the constraints and costs that they face? These questions concern the political economy of involvement in policy making for different actors, and they are obviously central to understanding who wins and who loses how much on what kinds of urban policy issues. In chapter 6, I will thus analyze

the incentives and obstacles that mayors face and will try to show that the strategy of influence that any particular mayor employs depends on subtle features of issue context, political style, and institutional setting. In the final chapter I will examine the future of the ungovernable city and appraise a number of prominent strategies for solving its problems. I will not however offer any simple solutions to the enduring problem of urban governance.