Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 15

# Part I

## PROLOGUE

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 16

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 17

# 1

# WHY STUDY *URBAN* POLITICS?

Peter John

At its most straightforward, urban politics is about authoritative decision-making at a smaller scale than national units – the politics of the sub-national level. Examples of urban politics are a mayor's decision about what policy to follow in a city, the consequences of a neighbourhood participation exercise, or the decision of a locally important business to relocate away from an area, with a loss of jobs and income. In other words, urban is local. Of course, it is not possible to separate out neatly the local from national or even international politics as each one affects the other, particularly in an era of ever deepening global influences (Sellers, 2005); and national decision-makers affect what happens in places like cities just as local decisions have a knock-on effect higher up. But the focus of the interest is at the sub-national level with particular reference to the political actors and institutions operating there. As with all definitions in the social sciences, the context is multidimensional and the boundaries are fuzzy, but it is usually clear when a topic is primarily about urban politics and when it is not.

Urban in the dictionary means relating to a city, which denotes dense built-up areas and centres of population as opposed to rural and less populated places. Indeed, most of the study of urban politics is about cities, which mean that some writers think that urban politics is about 'the politics in urbanised communities' (Stoker, 1998: 120). But such a limitation marginalises vast tracts of non-urban areas – and the people who live and work there – and also counts out units that transcend urban areas, such as regions. In any case, it is also impossible to define where is the boundary between urban and non-urban. And what about suburban areas? Is not rural life highly urbanised in many respects? There is also a geographic bias in tshe use of language, with most researchers in Europe happy with the local politics tag, whereas the US has the urban politics definition. Probably the urban epithet is winning over, with its extensive use in the less developed world and in Asia. In Europe since the 1970s, there has been a move to replace the use of the term 'local' with 'urban' (Young, 1975; Dunleavy, 1980), partly to emulate US intellectual endeavours, but also to signal that local politics is not as a previous generation of scholars assumed it was; that is mainly about describing local political institutions and expressing the ideal of local self-government. Urban is associated with the importance of city processes, such as population movements, employment changes, and the political conflicts that arise from the intensity of economic

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 18



competition and ethnic diversity of many cities, something that is heightened by the increasing urbanisation of modern life across the world.

So urban politics is on the one hand a description and analysis of a spatial scale of operation, but, on the other, about the wider socio-political-economic processes associated with cities and urban areas – and is concerned with the links between the two. In part, this focus can be on the various policy problems, such as inner city deprivation or environmental damage, and possible solutions to them. But the interest is also theoretical, about how economic power and class politics play out in the city and take a particular form because of the spatial location and particular structural constraints in operation. The question of economic power and city politics goes to the heart of the classic pluralist–elitist debate in the 1950s and 1960s, which consolidated urban politics as a sub-discipline, with Dahl and his associates arguing for a description of a more open and accessible political system than their elitist counterparts, who studied the closed and high status elites who appeared to govern cities (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion). As Geddes demonstrates in Chapter 4, power is also central to the long-running Marxist contribution to the analysis of the power of the city, appearing in the 1970s (Pickvance, 1995; Geddes, Chapter 4 in this volume), such as in the work of Castells (1974, 1978) in Europe and Saunders (1980) in the UK, coming to prominence with the work of Harvey (1973) and Davis (1990), and continuing in more recent debates led by Cox (2001). With such a focus on the concepts, it is no surprise that philosophical takes on urban theory themselves constitute an academic industry. In fact, almost any theoretical topic can be aligned with urban politics – rational choice, post-Fordism, postmodernism are few that have been tried. The succession of theoretical edifices has been described by Dunleavy as a series of tanks lying wrecked on the academic road, each one tried, exploded and then abandoned.[1] Thus the urban political field is highly flexible and diverse, something that urbanists tend to like about their subject. It also makes the definitional issue rather irrelevant. As Stoker (1998) comments, what matters for definition is the practice of studying urban politics, making the topic what academics do at a particular point in time. Urban politics becomes a 'flag of convenience' allowing researchers to pursue their topic of interest.

Even if we do not wish to conflate urban with the study of cities, most urbanists tend to be fans of these places, and believe them to be interesting even if they recognise the negative side in the forms of conflict, pollution and crime. It is also no surprise that urbanists like cities as places to study and live, with their diversity of lifestyles and groups; their celebration of ethnicity; and large choice of consumption, whether it is food, the arts, clothes or housing. In that sense, most urbanists use their leisure for some enjoyable participant observation.

In spite of the attractions of cities, the 'why' question for urbanists often elicits some panic as well as self-confident justification. Urbanists are inclined to look over their shoulders at others in supposedly more exciting fields, such as international relations and global terror. Academics get a buzz from what they study from its relevance and importance, such as an exciting and newsworthy topic, or that one embodies salient political values. But urban political scientists sometimes feel too modest about theirs. Urban or local governments are usually subordinate to other levels of government,

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 19



with less powers and responsibilities, and where key decisions about powers and finances get taken at other levels. This diminutive status in politics can make people think that the topic is less important than the prominent dealings of nation states or international organisations (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992: 1). In the English case, the lack of importance is underlined by the poor way in which local government has been treated by the sovereign parliament and executive in the years since the mid-1970s, with the loss of its powers and controls over finance along with intense legal regulation by the centre (John, 1994), which successive governments have done nothing to correct, and if anything have heightened. Indeed, a recent study highlights just how few functions and resources locally elected governments control in their area (Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006). Partly this subordination is the result of the unusual centralisation of English life in its constitutional arrangements; it also reflects the contempt for local government by the London political elite, which a study of senior politicians and civil servants revealed through a series of off-the-record interviews (Jones and Travers, 1996). Partly because local government is perceived to administer things that others consider to be dull, such as bin emptying, street cleaning, drainage, and building quality, it is assumed the administration and decision-making of these activities is similarly tedious. And one prominent public figure, Lord Redcliffe-Maud, even described local government as 'sewage without tears'.[2] Then there is the British equation of local government with bureaucratic routine, petty-fogging red tape, corruption, small mindedness, mediocrity, embodying the limited nature of social culture outside the great metropolis, where it is hard to see grand opera, for example. Such is what the London elite would have others believe, but such public perception may rub off on students of urban politics who may think the subject boring and have to defend its choice to their families who may share the popular misconceptions. However, the British case is extreme – a cause for academic interest rather than the opposite – as local government has a greater importance in national life in France and the USA where local politicians are national figures.

In fact, it is possible to find the very features that make local government unattractive to some appealing to others. Sewage may be about the machinations of minor bureaucrats, but it can illustrate issues of power and collective action problems. There is a fashionable set of research in historical studies about rubbish, dirt, waste, which illustrate the nature of the urban space.[3] In fact, the very grittiness, action-centredness and practicality of the problems that typical urban governments face creates research opportunities for the budding urbanist, a topic this chapter returns to.

Enthusiasm for the interesting aspects of urban politics should not be confused with belief in the topic. A lot of writers assume that the very characteristics that others despise in urban politics can actually be a reason for studying it. Thus the subordination of urban political institutions and the practical policy-orientated aspects of urban policy become fetishised. Because local government is supposed to embody certain values, following them through may be an attractive route for the researcher or at least a background set of concerns that inform a study. Such normative preoccupations are very common in research, and often influence that important early decision to opt for a topic of study. Someone who is interested in the state of the

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 20



environment studies green politics, a feminist studies women and so on. The belief in the values of political decentralisation thus may influence the topic choice. These values are implicit in the arguments of local representative organisations, local bureaucrats and politicians and some academics that seek to defend its autonomy and believe that local democracy is by definition a good thing. They are usually about the relevance and appropriateness of locally informed choices, based on the group of people affected by a set of decisions, a set of arguments going back to J. S. Mill in *Representative Government*. Related to this is the value of pluralism in the grand polity (Sharpe, 1970), allowing a thousand flowers to bloom. Not only is such diversity a good thing in itself, but it allows for innovation. From this core, local government has been seen to embody a host of desirable political values, such as equality and diversity. This is not the place to have a detailed review of the theory of local government, except to say that such attempts usually fail because the empirics fail to support the argument – there is nothing special in local government terms of representation, pluralism and innovation, and much of the opposite can be found. It is impossible to create a range of public goods for local government which do not involve other levels of government making a universal justification of self-government activities something of a chimera. In any case, the so-called values are so vague that it is hard to come up with a specific justification of local government actions or institutions (Stoker, 2005). Moreover, value-driven research rarely makes for good social science as it encourages the researcher to confirm an initial set of values.

In any case, most social scientists find that, in the business of doing research, value concerns often take the back seat because the main project becomes that of explanation and engagement with the theoretical problems of the discipline. In many ways the topic of study may not be relevant. It is possible to imagine many topics that appear to be dull on the outside but become fascinating as the research develops. In that sense, it does not matter what to study, but how to do it. Here we have what may be called the 'Swiss cowbell theory of dissertation topic choice'. The thought experiment works like this: imagine a research student who has to start a dissertation on Swiss cowbells (say because of a funding opportunity), who is initially disheartened by the topic, but then comes to examine the variation in cowbell sizes and sounds, invents a theory of political cooperation and conflict based on their ownership and display, which is tested by a model of the appearance of different styles and so on. Then a successful career beckons. If the cowbell theory were true, then all that would matter is that the student chooses something and sticks with it – the payoff comes in time. Choosing on the basis of initial interest and fashion does not matter because all researchers end up doing the same sort of thing, and a good researcher will create an interesting piece of work no matter how different the subject. What the initial interest does is to get people started. And in fact, accident often plays a role in starting people off on a course of study, such as a tip from a teacher or an early project that turns into a longer dissertation. Once the early choices have been made, it is easy to move to the next linked research project. Path dependence means that there are economies from staying in the same kind of work because

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 21



knowledge and expertise pay off, and high transactions costs rule out a topic change. Reputation means that others ask for chapters and contributions, and research grant proposals have the right curriculum vitae to back them up.

If it is the case that topics only vary to the extent to which the researcher has engaged with them rather than some intrinsic level of interest, then what should govern the choice of topic? Issues of practicality and tractability now come to the fore. And here urban politics has some unique advantages, especially for the beginning student; and if they were more widely known about, would make international relations researchers green with envy, particularly when they have sunk their precious investment of time and resources in studying something so inaccessible as an international political movement, for example.

Urban politics has two main characteristics that derive from its location in multiple and often small units below the level of the state – the first is propinquity; the second is numerosity (see John, 2006 for an outline of the argument). Propinquity denotes the closeness of the urban space where actors interact frequently and tend to be small in number. The urban is politics in miniature and this creates a particular kind of political system rather than a mirror image of other levels, largely to do with smaller numbers of the elite and the ease at which its members can interact. And it is no surprise that one of the enduring themes of the study of urban politics is political power, not because power only operates at the local level, but that an urban space is a convenient and tractable unit for studying such a difficult phenomenon and power takes a particular form in a localised space, which partly explains the profusion of community power studies of the 1960s, the Marxist accounts of the 1970s and 80s, and the regime case studies of the 1990s. It is possible for one person to make the rounds of the whole local political elite, such as the author and Alistair Cole did for their study of four cities in Britain and France (Cole and John, 2001), so much so that the researchers became a rather over-familiar sight in the waiting rooms of their case study municipalities. Trying that in Whitehall or Washington would require an army of researchers who would still be overwhelmed by the exercise.

Propinquity also means the actors are close to what they administer – there is a coal face aspect to urban politics where policy and implementation are near to the political process (see Yates, 1977), and where politics extends way beyond the formal institutions into the realms of governance and civil society. For the political scientist who wants to study real-world phenomena, but still look at the role of political actors, the urban space is appropriate, and more interesting than the field offices of a large central government department, for example. Thus the student of terror can get much more of a handle of the origins and impact of terrorism by studying the local factors leading to recruitment and the policies adopted to counteract it. As Tip O'Neal (O'Neill and Hymel, 1995) said, 'all politics is local'. When dug down, the local aspects of political phenomena are usually at work because actors usually relate to particular places for electoral support where they make contact with their followers; on the policy side decision-makers need to address the practicalities and politics of implementation in particular places, which end up being the places that local government

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 22



administers and the wide array of governmental and non-governmental organisations interact to try to solve collective action problems. Typically urban problems intersect with a wide variety of fields, and propinquity means that questions of society, race and poverty closely intersect with politics. Thus urban political scientists have a rich vein of interdisciplinary work to draw upon without becoming economists, sociologists, lawyers and social policy experts. Propinquity has some even more obvious advantages as it is possible to study out of one's back door as universities are usually located in or near to cities or towns accessible to the urban researcher. Apart from the cost and convenience of the bus rather than the airplane, it is usually the case that urban political actors are willing to see a local researcher (though the backyard can create problems too). Even if the urban area is overseas, it is usually easier to get access than to the offices of a national government, for example.

Numerosity is the multiple occurrences of local governments, often amounting to many hundreds. For statistical projects hungry for large numbers, urban politics is a feast because the large N means that it is acceptable to deploy a test based on a 95 percent confidence interval with the idea that some of the natural variation in observations comes from chance, which means it is possible to make inferences when things do not happen by chance. This is a massive advantage because the nation state has only one observation or a limited number. Even comparative politics projects can only have a handful of cases, which can be multiplied by having observations over time, but not by that much. By contrast, it is possible to perform routine statistical tests in urban politics, such as to find out where there is a relationship between political parties and public expenditure for example, which has stimulated a plethora of output studies (e.g. Boyne, 1985).

Numerosity is not just of advantage to the statistically literate, it is a boon to the qualitative researcher as the abundance of local government units means that there are many cases from which to choose. This convenient factor means that the researcher can select cases on variations of the independent variable as well as ensure that the dependent variable varies too. By being rigorous on selection, it is possible to re-create scientific conditions in the data with just a few cases. In this sense, research in urban politics is much closer to meeting the ideals of *Designing Social Inquiry* (King et al., 1994) than most projects in the comparative country field.

Rather than be down-hearted at the lowly status of urban politics or over-inflated by an exaggerated sense of its virtues, the urban researcher should be glad that the topic offers many natural advantages as well as offering interesting places like cities to study. Research is easier and is more tractable than at other levels of government. It offers more possibilities for good social science because numerosity ensures variation in the units and propinquity enhances quality of and access to the data. It is no surprise that urban politics was the starting point for some of the major political scientists in the twentieth century, such as Dahl, Polsby and Lowi in the US, and Dunleavy and Newton in the UK. Given the natural advantages, it would not be surprising if more scholars found the urban route in the twenty-first century.

Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 23



## Notes

1 Comment made at an urban politics panel at the UK Political Studies Association annual conference, Leicester 1993.
2 As reported in Peter Hamant (ed.), 1978, *The Empire Club of Canada Speeches 1977–1978*. Toronto, Canada: The Empire Club Foundation. pp. 41–54.
3 See the London Consortium course, 'Shit and civilization: Our ambivalent relationship to ordure in the city, culture, and the psyche'.

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Davies-Ch-01:Davies-Part-I-Ch-01 9/8/2008 7:40 PM Page 24