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Author(s): Jonathan S. Davies

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URBAN REGIME THEORY: A Normative-Empirical Critique

JONATHAN S. DAVIES
University of Warwick

ABSTRACT: *Over the past 10 years, urban regime theory has become the dominant paradigm for studying urban politics in liberal democracies. Yet there is disagreement about how far it can help us to understand urban political processes. This article argues that regime theory is best understood as a theory of structuring with limits in its analysis of the market economy. These limits undermine its ability to explain the importance of political agency—the scope of individual or collective choice in political decisions and the impact of those choices in the evolution of US cities. It is further argued that there are important normative dimensions to urban regime theory, most fully articulated in Elkin’s commercial republic, which academic commentaries have not acknowledged. However, the empirical analysis developed in regime theory contradicts its normative objectives. The absence of a conceptualization of market dynamics, in the light of pessimism about the prospects for equitable regime governance, not only limits it as a theory of structuring but it also renders it unable to explain how the commercial republic can be realized. Regime theory is, therefore, unconvincing for two reasons. It cannot explain how much local politics matter, and it fails to demonstrate that its normative goal—more equitable regime governance—can be achieved, given the realities of the US market economy. Regime theory needs a more developed understanding of structuring. It may be fruitful, therefore, for regime theorists to re-engage critically with variants of Marxism, which unlike Structuralism, recognize the possibility of agency.*

Urban regime theory, according to Imbroscio (1998a), has recently become the dominant theory for the study of local politics. Scholars from many parts of the western world have engaged with it critically and sympathetically, from the US, where “America’s major urban journals are now filled with references to regimes” (Harding, 2000, p. 54) to New Zealand (Brown, 1999) and Europe (see Harding, 2000; John & Cole, 1998; Lawless, 1994; Levine, 1994; Stoker & Mossberger, 1994; Stoker, 1995; Strom, 1996). The recent debate between Stone (1998a) and Imbroscio (1998a, 1998b) demonstrates that the explanatory power of regime theory remains strongly contested. Yet, in these debates, two important issues in regime theory have

**Direct correspondence to: Dr. Jonathan S Davies, Local Government Centre, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. E-mail: jonathan.davies@wbs.ac.uk*

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been underplayed: 1) its power as a theory of structuring, and 2) the goals to which it is committed.

The starting point of this article is that contrary to the views of critics who view regime theory as localist (Di Gaetano, 1997; Ward, 1997a, 1997b) and intentionalist (Painter, 1997), it is best understood as a theory of structuring (Abrams, 1982; Stone, 1989). It is concerned specifically with how the dialectic between market control of production and popular control of government affects political action in US cities. However, there are deficits in regime theory that undermine the political objectives of its founding authors, Elkin (1987) and Stone (1989).

There are two main points advanced here. First, as a partial account of structuring, regime theory is unable to explain how economic trends affect urban regimes. In rejecting Althusserian Marxism for a more agency-centered analysis of local politics, a critical perspective on the behavior of market economies has been sacrificed. Feldman (1997) is, therefore, correct in arguing that it lacks an overall theoretical framework. This deficit matters because economic fluctuations can have substantial effects on local political processes. The second point is that the goals of greater democracy and the amelioration of inequality in regime politics are not sustained theoretically or empirically. Elkin and Stone are both pessimistic about the possibility that equality might be achieved without damaging the market economy to which they are committed. As well as being an incomplete analysis of the influences on urban politics, regime theory does not, therefore, support the normative project to which its standard bearers are committed. Hence, the key claim advanced in this article is that regime theory needs a theory of structuring which explains how its normative goals can be realized.

This article is organized into five sections. First, the roots of regime theory are discussed and its conceptual foundations are briefly outlined. The normative dimension of regime theory is then explained, focusing on its most explicit theorization, Elkin's commercial republic. Third, Stone's account of structuring and the elementary motivations in human behavior is outlined, highlighting the limits of regime theory as an approach to structuring. Fourth, the problems inherent in a limited understanding of how the market economy affects local politics are highlighted; and fifth, it is suggested that in rejecting structuralism, regime theory overlooks Marxist thinking that recognizes human agency. It is argued that whether Marxist or not, a re-engagement with economic theory is necessary if regime theory is to overcome its limits.

THE CONCEPTUAL ROOTS OF URBAN REGIME THEORY

For an understanding of urban regime theory, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between the work of Elkin and Stone. In the early 1980s, the work leading to the classic analyses of regimes in Dallas (Elkin, 1987) and Atlanta (Stone, 1989) was based on mutual concerns (Elkin, 1985b). These commentaries, however, were different in emphasis. Elkin was concerned with the way structural pressures produced a collaborative imperative among governmental and non-governmental actors, and with his normative project, the commercial republic. Stone, on the other hand, was more interested in the detailed political processes to which these structural pressures gave rise. His study of regime politics in Atlanta is about the way political power is realized in city life. He is also concerned about inequality. Elkin's later work (see Elkin, 1994; Elkin & Soltan, 1993; Soltan & Elkin, 1996) is theoretical, further developing the concept of the commercial republic as the good society in which local politics are the cornerstone. Stone has become more concerned with practical politics and the difficulties of ameliorating inequality in school education (Stone, 1998d). But despite this parting of the ways, there is much common ground and it is argued that Stone's work addresses practical problems in building a commercial republic in which regimes are an important good. By viewing Elkin and Stone as complementary, it is possible to examine issues that are underplayed by one

author or the other. Despite the different pathways they have followed, it is fruitful to view their work as theoretically interdependent.

The theoretical origins of urban regime theory are complex. It is partly a development of the critical pluralist community power tradition of the 1950s and 1960s (Dahl, 1961; Hunter 1953) in the neo-pluralist tradition (Lindblom, 1977). Lindblom recognized that governments in capitalist countries require economic growth and that in a market system decisions are made by business leaders and government plays a limited role. These decisions affect everyone, but they are not subject to democratic control (Lindblom, 1977). Thus, the unrefined pluralist notion that groups have equal access to the decision making process is perceived to be flawed. Regime theory subscribes to this notion of a division of labor between state and market in which ownership of productive assets rests largely in the hands of the private sector while the machinery of government is subject to popular control (Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989). It is concerned with the interface between the public and private sectors and, according to Stone (1993, 1998a), the regime is the organism which mediates the relationship between popular control of the political process and private control of the economy.

At the heart of regime theory is Stone's conceptualization of systemic power, based on Lindblom's formulation that in market societies, governments are strongly predisposed toward the preferences of business leaders. Systemic power is defined as:

that dimension of power in which durable features of the socioeconomic system (the situational element) confer advantages and disadvantages on groups (the intergroup element) in ways predisposing public officials to favor some interests at the expense of others (the indirect element) . . . Because its operation is completely impersonal and deeply embedded in the social structure, this form of power can appropriately be termed "systemic" (Stone, 1980, p. 980).

For Stone, systemic power results in an indirect conflict between favored and disfavored groups. The favored are normally those concerned with economic growth, while the disfavored are interested in redistribution. Due to its control of productive resources, business is likely to exercise a privileged influence on the urban policy agenda. City officials are the bearers of these structural constraints and power relationships are articulated in the behavior of these officials (Stone, 1980). Drawing on Hunter (1953), Stone (1988) defines *pre-emptive power*, as "a capacity to occupy, hold, and make use of a strategic position" (p. 83). Pre-emptive power derives from systemic power in the sense that the state-market division identified in regime theory tends to endow business, rather than other groups, with the capacity for pre-emption, or the capacity to occupy a strategic position. Systemic power creates the conditions in which pre-emption occurs, but pre-emption itself is dependent upon the exercise of those capacities. It is, therefore, an "intentional and active" form of power (Stoker, 1995, p. 64). These overlapping concepts, systemic and pre-emptive power, are the cornerstones of regime theory. If systemic power is understood as a tendency within liberal-democratic societies for politicians to accord a privileged role to controllers of productive assets (business), then the realization of this tendency is dependent upon the exercise of pre-emptive power by the controllers of productive assets (Elkin, 1994).

However, urban regime theory also has its roots in the structuralist school of Marxism (Althusser, 1979; Poulantzas, 1978). It purports to reject structuralism, emphasizing the importance of agency in politics (Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1980). Yet the influence of structuralist thinking is present in early formulations. Stone's discussion of systemic power and the way contradictions between the imperatives of economic liberalism and political democracy are embodied in public officials reflects Poulantzas's (1978) notion of the state as bearer of the

“condensate of class forces.” For Stone, state actors bear the contradiction between liberalism and democracy, meaning that their behavior is an expression of the relative balance between these forces. Hence, the state is superstructural for Stone as it is for Poulantzas in the sense that it is neutral with respect to contending forces. For Stone, however, it is the contradiction between liberalism and democracy that represents the core dialectic in society, not classes. While this formulation breaks from structuralist class analysis, it is equally guilty of discounting agency and free will. It is only in his later work that Stone (1993) releases his agents from being the bearers of systemic contradictions.

Regime theory is also based on very different normative commitments. Socialism is not the objective. Instead, the market economy is viewed as the best possible social form. Prescriptions for change are made within this framework. While the normative dimension of regime theory has been underplayed in academic commentaries, it is a vitally important element. The regime is an important institutional form in the good market society.

URBAN REGIME THEORY AND THE COMMERCIAL REPUBLIC

Elkin and Stone share a commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy. In practice, this means greater political equality and popular control and the amelioration of business privilege in politics. Stone (1987b) has urged fellow scholars to take a normative approach to the future study of the politics of urban development. An important theme in his work has been the objective of building more inclusive regimes with the goal of ameliorating inequality (Stone, 1993, 1998d). For Elkin and Stone, this objective is underpinned by the neo-pluralist understanding at the heart of regime theory. Collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors is necessary for governance outputs to be achieved. While urban regimes may be difficult to build (Stone, 1989), if they are not built, governing inertia will result. Regimes are, therefore, worthy political institutions. Stone (1987a) argues that political institutions have normative consequences: “In principle, they embody an approximation of justice—some notion of how citizens ought to be related to one another” (p. 295). In this sense, normative issues are deeply embedded in regime analysis. Stone does not, however, believe that existing urban regimes represent a just conceptualization of citizen relations. He wishes to ameliorate the inequity he finds in Atlanta, seeking a blueprint for political arrangements “in which those who have control of much property are unable to dominate those who have little or none” (Stone, 1987a, p. 295). Elkin develops these concerns in his work on the commercial republic (Elkin, 1985c, 1986, 1987, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996a, 1996b).

Elkin argues that his idea of the commercial republic reflects the aspirations of most US citizens. Such a society has two organizing principles: it must be subject to political decision (democracy), but it must not arrange the daily lives of individuals (liberalism): “A liberal democratic regime is the successful accommodation of these two impulses—one popular, the other private and individualistic. Its appeal lies in its contradictions—and so do its difficulties” (Elkin, 1987, p. 200).

Given that the market economy is good, according to Elkin, the controllers of productive assets not only will, but must, and ought to, have substantial discretion over how these assets are employed. In liberal democracies, the application of this principle means that business leaders must, and ought to, have a special place in government counsels (Elkin, 1994). But, at present, this place is viewed as excessively pre-eminent. The objective is to mediate the structural advantages conferred on the business sector through the reform of political institutions.

Elkin, inspired by Aristotle, develops a constitutional or constitutive approach to the design of institutions. He argues that political institutions cannot simply decide to generate good outcomes, like freedom and equality, but that to succeed, they must have freedom and equality

embedded within them. Political institutions are, therefore, as much ends in themselves as the outcomes they are intended to produce. They are important not only for what they do, but for what they are (Elkin, 1985c). Elkin proposes the reconstitution of those institutions that facilitate business pre-emption of the local policy agenda with measures to reduce it, for example, enhancing the constitutional status of local government and reducing the mobility of capital. Both Elkin and Stone argue that greater federal aid to the locality could be used to embolden local politicians in the face of business demands and to encourage more widespread engagement in the political process by community groups and non-profit organizations (Elkin, 1987; Stone, 1989).

Yet throughout this normative discussion runs a strong thread of pessimism, visible in the ideas for reform put forward by both authors, and in Elkin's view of capitalism. According to Elkin, the system itself undermines serious efforts at reform: "Regardless of their merits, the prospects of such reforms occurring are slim, not least because the very workings of the political economy that serve to prompt the concern for reform will substantially impede it" (Elkin, 1987, p. 181).

Even if reforms occur and institutions are designed in the way recommended, they may be consumed by the strains of the larger political economy (Elkin, 1987). Elkin also asks himself whether it is possible for mutual respect to flourish between individuals and groups in conditions where there is a division between owner and worker. Greater material equality is necessary to generate this mutual respect, but it may not be sufficient (Elkin, 1996a). Even if there were material equality, asks Elkin, would the very fact of an owner-worker relationship create insurmountable barriers to the mutual respect on which the success of the commercial republic depends? Elkin thus doubts whether his goals are realizable: "Any pleasure that we may derive from noting that there are no compelling alternatives at the moment to a commercial republican regime, for Americans at least, must be tempered by the extreme difficulty of realizing such a regime" (Elkin, 1994, p. 137).

This is not to say that variation in regime type is viewed as impossible. Both Elkin (1987) and Stone (1993) develop typologies in which business influence on political decisions is ameliorated to a greater or lesser extent. In his recent work, Stone (1998d) concerns himself with trying to realize elements of this vision by analyzing attempts to create a level playing field for lower class children in school education. Yet even in education, where the growth agenda is weaker, the prospects for establishing regimes to enhance the opportunities for lower class children are perceived to be poor (1998b,c). While Stone (1993) believes in principle that it should be possible to generate collaboration around a broader agenda, he acknowledges that lower class opportunity expansion regimes are largely hypothetical structures and that the coordination and mobilization tasks necessary to achieve them would be massive. These are overwhelming constraints on efforts to ameliorate inequality and neither author shows any conviction that inclusive and sustainable regimes can be achieved. For Elkin, this lack of conviction lies in his view of the wider economy. For Stone, it lies in the difficulties that other groups face in pre-empting power as a consequence of systemic power. The effect for both is that the lower classes lose out. The following sections outline the understanding of structuring which regime theory brings to bear on urban politics, arguing that it lacks the theoretical tools needed to show how more equality can be achieved in regime politics.

STONE ON STRUCTURING AND PREFERENCE FORMATION

Stone's approach to political power draws on the work of Abrams (1982), Tilly (1984), and Giddens (1979). The relationship between governmental and non-governmental actors is based on his understanding of structuring (Stone, 1989). "Politics must not be romanticized as a sphere

of free agency. While not tightly controlled by deterministic laws, there are recurring tendencies in political behavior that must be reckoned with” (Stone, 1990, p. 10).

Of central significance to this analysis is the duality of structure. Structures are understood as both the medium and the outcome of the reproduction of practices (Giddens, 1979). Agents are not, therefore, subordinate to structures, they act on them and change them. How does this process of structuring work in urban regime theory? Stone tackles this problem in detail. Perhaps his major contribution to regime theory is his conceptualization of power as social production that derives from the interfaces between systemic and pre-emptive power (Stone, 1980, 1988). Stone uses the notion of pre-emptive power to challenge ideological hegemony as an explanation for regime characteristics, which he describes as the “social control paradigm” associated with structuralism (1989, p. 222). In its place, he proposes a model of social production, or *power to*, in which public officials need to get things done and seek suitable allies for that task. Stone suggests that urban power in the US bears a class imprint that cannot be predicted by pluralist theory. He believes that this comes about in ways requiring no ruling elite or command forms of domination (1980). His approach is based on a critique of an argument that he attributes to Marxism—that differences in opinion about governing are insignificant within a capitalist society.

Stone argues that change comes about not through the alteration of basic commitments, but through the piecemeal evolution of practices of cooperation. This detail is important because power lies in the evolution of new practices. Thus key developments may occur not in ideology but in the specifics of how people organize (Stone, 1989). The way people organize, according to Stone, is in pursuit of small opportunities, comprising selective incentives, small purposes, and accomplishments. Most of the time, actors pursue immediate opportunities and respond to immediate threats (1989). If power is about the capacity to get things done, then getting things done is about small opportunities (Stone, 1980).

Stone, therefore, focuses on the role of the agent in agenda setting. He presents a Tillyan model of low social coherence, where no single group can dominate ideologically, even if they dominate politically. For Stone, governance is not dependent on control; it is about bringing together elements in a fragmented world (Stone, 1989; Tilly, 1984). Business control in Atlanta is not command power; it is indirect and limited. Attitudes are not controlled, but anti-business views find it very difficult to gain a foothold, given that business resources are crucial to the activities of governance (Stone, 1989). Regime formation for Stone is partly dependent on an actor’s evaluation of the benefits of compliance or noncompliance in a coalition (Stone, 1989). The free rider problem is addressed with the allocation by key players in the regime of selective incentives to induce and coerce compliance (1989). In Atlanta, it is business that holds the key with slack resources used as selective incentives to purchase compliance (Stone, 1989). For regime change to occur, opposing groups have both to raise the cost of compliance and pro-actively generate a governing coalition to supersede the entrenched interest of the developer (Stone, 1988).

This is the terrain of political agency, but it is constricted by other dimensions of power. Notwithstanding his emphasis on *power to* in the process of regime building, Stone recognizes that different types of power are interwoven. *Power to* is a particular dimension of power that has to be exercised in regime building. However, other dimensions of power are also evident. Stone argues that *power to* in regime construction and maintenance “spills over into a kind of domination” (Stone, 1989, p. 229). Further, he argues that *power to* translates into a form of *power over* (Stone, 1993). He shows how *power to* can generate indirect conflicting relationships, given that the exercise of pre-emption by party A, to influence the policy agenda of B, excludes party C from the policy process (Stone, 1980). *Power to*, then, is not simply about cooperation, it is also about variables that predict certain forms of cooperation. We are

back at the starting point in regime theory, that the forms of cooperation we observe in society can be explained by the division of labor between state and market. In analyzing structural conditions as the opportunity for action, Stone acknowledges the constraints that the exercise of opportunity imposes. Consequently, *power to* has limited purchase as a distinct perspective on power. This analysis suggests that patterns of political action are deeply structured. So how is the capacity of agents to exercise choice theorized?

Stone's account of behavioral motivation begins with the assumption that people respond to what is familiar, immediate, and concrete. This behavioral tendency is articulated as narrow cognition, where individual preferences derive from one's place in society (Stone, 1993). In Stone's analysis, the big picture is not normally visible to the individual. However, being comprised of loosely coupled structures, society is not subject to law-like processes akin to Marx's theory of capital. In keeping with this perspective, Stone adheres to the concept of bounded rationality, partial awareness of the whole, rather than false consciousness, the misapprehension of underlying trends in the whole and one's objective position within it. Within this context exist the "elementary principles of motivation" in human behavior (Stone, 1993, p. 10). At one pole can be found an economic rational tendency and at the other, a desire to be associated with something larger than personal concerns, a social-purposive tendency. This duality affects preference formation: "Vision can be expanded by discussion and interaction, leadership, exposure to a social movement, participation in a set of activities that point beyond the immediate and much more" (Stone, 1993, p. 10).

As this comment implies, preferences are fluid and Stone questions the differential appeal of causes. Here, the notion of feasibility is important: "There is circularity in the relationship between commitment to a cause and its feasibility. The more people support a cause, the greater its feasibility" (Stone, 1993, p. 11). The way perceptions of feasibility are constructed can be derived from this account. Feasibility cannot be reduced to the question of support for a cause—that if we all want to do something, we can. Stone's narrow cognition provides another basis for relating support for a project to its feasibility. If people articulate both economic rational and social-purposive motivations, then the extent to which one or the other is realized depends on a person's perception of their immediate position in relation to others. People's interactions shape their preferences and their understanding of feasibility. Narrow cognition regulates ambition:

In short, the ready availability of means rather than the will of dominant actors may explain what is pursued and why. Hence, hegemony in a capitalist order may be more a matter of ease of cooperation around profit-oriented activities than the unchallenged ascendancy of core ideas (Stone, 1993, p. 12).

Feasibility is also the subject of struggle over conviction and this is where social production becomes social control (Stone, 1993). The implication is that those with resources are most likely to be able to convince others—a form of *power over* because they hold the key to opportunity and thus to preference formation. The imbalance created by uneven resource distribution itself represents a mode of social control whether or not the imbalance is willfully pursued by the dominant agents. For Stone, it is easier to be pro capitalist in a free market world than it is to be otherwise. This simple observation predicts a pragmatic view of purpose. Pragmatic behavior is a product of narrow cognition. It is behavior that might be flawed in the light of wider cognition. This is not false consciousness in the Marxian sense, but Stone clearly accepts that pragmatism is conditioned by systemic power: "If people are purposive, but purposive in wanting to be involved in achievable goals, and if some goals are more readily

achievable than others, then people will tend toward those goals that are achievable” (Stone, 1993, p. 12).

While pragmatism is connected to an imbalance in resource distribution, preference formation is linked to pragmatism. And opportunities for change afforded by governance and the narrow cognition of agents are limited. Preference formation is thus endogenous to the power relationship, suggesting that the scope for political interpretations of systemic power is limited.

Stone develops the argument by emphasizing that individual preferences do not form in isolation but through social bonds. Coalitions are formed through the exchange of information and through perceived interdependence. Preferences can then change if understandings change. Understanding can change by virtue of purposive interaction (Stone, 1993). Finally, “Contrary to the assumptions of some analysts, cooperation is not an unnatural act that people have to be coerced or bribed to perform. To be sure, the centrifugal force of individual interest and immediately achievable purpose have to be reckoned with, but there is also the possibility of tapping the human yearning for larger social purpose” (1993, p. 25).

Humans, then, are not crude instrumentalists. While being purposive is a fundamental part of human nature most of the time, according to Stone (1998), “people are drawn to small purposes” (p. 255).

It is this latter argument that brings agency to the fore in Stone’s analysis, freeing regime theory from structuralism and making clearer the distinction between systemic and pre-emptive power. In the instrumental mode of behavior, public officials reproduce the complex of structural pressures upon them because it is in their interests to do so. The stronger pressure, predicting decisions that reflect these pressures, determines self-interest. The social purposive motivation, however, opens the possibility for more flexible interpretation of the relative pressures of democracy and economic development by allowing that the balance of these pressures may be represented less than precisely in action. In this perspective, the local official is more than a conduit for the struggle between competing forces. He or she is a mediator, capable not only of articulating structural pressures but also of evaluating them. This is evidence of a development in Stone’s thinking between 1980 and 1993. It is only with this development that his approach to structuring becomes amenable to free will; and it is only given this understanding that *power to* and pre-emptive power matter. The capacity for mediation by individual and collective agents makes political outcomes less predictable and the task of combating iniquitous regimes more plausible (Cox, 1995).

This complex of ideas purports to explain why development regimes are more likely in American cities than those oriented on enhancing lower class opportunities (Stone, 1993). Ultimately, those with control over resources, wittingly or otherwise, influence perceptions of interest and, therefore, preferences. However, it does not explain the events that lead people to swing between the polarities of economic rational and social purposive action. The role of systemic power in influencing human behavior is recognized, but this is not a fully developed theory of structuring because the factors that influence the extent to which people are able to oscillate between polarities in the exercise of *power to* are not explained. Stone contends that change occurs at the margins of enduring relationships. If enduring relationships, like urban regimes, are conceived of as structures, then Stone’s (1989) account of Atlanta shows that events occur which have an impact on such structures and help to reshape them. There is reciprocity between structure (regime) and agents (regime actors). However, this limited reciprocity occurs within an invariant set of socioeconomic rules (those expressed in the relationship between liberalism and democracy), which makes regime change extremely difficult.

For Stone to argue convincingly that local agents can influence and change structures incrementally, he would need to show not only that agents influence regime activities, but also that the very factors which facilitate business privilege can be changed incrementally by re-

gime activity. He shows only that social conditions allow for a range of outcomes that can be influenced by urban regimes (Stone, 1993). So, the regime influences outcomes but not the structural forces that constitute it. This interpretation is supported by Imbroscio's (1998a, 1998b) critique of the static formulation in regime theory of the division of labor between state and market. Structuring occurs between regime and agent but not between regime, agent, and systemic context. That is not to say that systemic context cannot be altered, but that it is unaffected by urban regimes.

Stone's concept of mediation is helpful in illustrating this point (Stone, 1998a). Urban regime theory posits that the impact of the global economy on the local economy is mediated by local governing structures. He shows how psychologists analyzed their subjects through a stimulus/response ($S > R$) framework, where S can be characterized as structure, and R as agency. This approach was flawed and another stage organism was added to the framework, giving stimulus/organism/response ($S > O > R$), where O mediates the impact of S on R (and vice versa). In regime theory, O and R are engaged in a constant process of structuring, giving ($O < > R$). But S , the systemic context, remains static, giving ($S > O < > R$). This analysis suggests that local relations are static, and heavily dependent on the unspecified vagaries of economic life, the opportunities and threats that it bestows.

Thus, patterns in the development of systemic forces are not acknowledged or explained and no allowance is made for how these patterns enable and constrain local political agency. This deficit limits the explanatory power of regime theory. The ability to explain and control economic trends is critical to the ability of agents to realize the commercial republic. What, then, does regime theory have to say about S , the systemic forces that give rise to regime politics?

REGIME THEORY AND THE MARKET ECONOMY

Stone (1991) acknowledges that in his concern with analyzing local political processes, he takes the profit economy for granted. He accepts that he is not concerned with how systemic power comes into being but only with how it is maintained in the system of local governance (1980). The dynamics of systemic power itself are not, therefore, discussed. Neither Elkin, nor Stone, have ever claimed that regime theory is a grand-narrative understanding of economic and political processes. Stone, at least, perceives it as a second level theory (1998a). But the problem is that this level of theory is inadequate for the normative and explanatory ambitions that regime theory harbors. In distancing itself from structural Marxism and downplaying economic theory, regime theory says nothing about why, in liberal democracy, there is often a destructive tension between business objectives and democratic demands. Both Elkin and Stone acknowledge the structural position of capitalism but they lack an explanation of economic trends and how these trends affect local politics. So, when Stone says that redevelopment policies are a response to economic restructuring, we do not know whether economic restructuring is a cause or an effect of political agency or both (Stone, 1993). An understanding of the dynamics of economic restructuring would add to an explanation of why businesses continue to dominate regimes, why inequality is growing, and why the prospects for drawing other groups into the political process on a sustainable basis are so limited.

Why then is Marxism rejected? Stone believes, as was noted above, that society is loosely coordinated and his Tillian view rejects the economy-centered view of the world on which Marxism is based (Stone, 1989). Elkin, on the other hand, objects to class analyses of the state because public officials are not instructed by a dominant capitalist class. He believes they exhibit a level of discretion that Marxism cannot explain. Elkin (1985b) believes that the ruling class thesis requires the dominant class to exercise an implausible degree of rationality and

planning. The Marxist thesis, therefore, requires evidence that the ruling class is capable of identifying decisions crucial to its interests and of calculating and carrying out a course of action to realize them. Elkin follows Lindblom's (1977) approach in which the central building blocks of societies are not classes, or modes of production, but control systems (Elkin, 1985a). Popular control and market economics, therefore, represent different control systems. In his critique of *The Urban Question* (Castells, 1977), Elkin (1979) argues that Castells and other Marxist scholars fail to integrate their accounts of structural contradictions with an adequate analysis of political processes.

In moving beyond Marxism, it is assumed that within the bounds of the profit economy, the terms of co-operation between government and business are negotiable (Stone, 1991). The business objective of growth is embodied in the activities and capacities of local officials (Elkin, 1985a). These are the grounds of agency, or free will, and it is the choices of state officials that explain economic fluctuation. Whatever the merits of this commitment to bring agency into political explanation, Elkin is pessimistic about the prospects for capitalist democracies. In language reminiscent of Marxism, he identifies a decline in both liberal and democratic practices and a crisis of liberal democracy represented as a decline in state legitimacy. The implication is that economic crises have been caused by an excess of democracy, or perhaps an over-articulation of democratic demands by state officials.

The state may be able to survive problems of declining productivity and capital accumulation, fiscal undernourishment . . . overloading . . . and disaggregation . . . These all cut deep, but because they are probably imbalances within existing arrangements, profits can be raised, interest aggregation can be increased, and citizen mobilization can be reduced and a crisis thus averted (Elkin, 1985b, p. 205).

But at the same time, "If a liberal democratic state is to survive, the political community or public must be seen as a source of evaluation. Just how this is to be done is less clear" (Elkin, 1985b, p. 206).

It is arguable that the problem this perspective poses for regime theory lies in its retreat from economic theory (Imbroscio, 1998b). In rejecting structural Marxism, Elkin and Stone have effectively dispensed with economics, despite Elkin's (1987) injunction that the critical question is "whether a regime dedicated to both popular control and a property-based market system can thrive" (p. 17). In this sense, regime theory requires an analysis of the long-term sustainability of the market economy. It does not explain the decline depicted by Elkin and it has no prescriptions. Furthermore, it does not address the implication underlying Elkin's pessimism; that the conditions for crises and for the process of decline are built into the social practices of accumulation and competition themselves. Nor does it consider the possible implications for the accumulation process should the state limit its capacity for profit as the commercial republic prescribes.

With the absence of a favorable economic diagnosis, a contradiction emerges between the need for public evaluation and the problem of democratic overload—poor economic performance caused by excessive citizen mobilization (Elkin, 1985b). It is here that the tension between the normative and the empirical dimensions of regime theory is at its sharpest. If it is true, as Elkin suggests, that to arrest the decline in liberal democracy further moderation of citizen demands must be secured, it cannot be possible to ameliorate business pre-eminence by reducing material inequality and increasing popular control. Therefore, the liberal element of regime theory appears to stand not in creative tension with the democratic element, but in a position where liberalism tends to undermine democracy and vice versa.

Of course, it can be argued that Elkin and Stone are too pessimistic. Cox (1995) argues that modes of competition and cost distribution are contingent factors meaning that the negotiating power of coalitions is variable. There are plenty of cases in the US and beyond where local politics are not characterized by business regimes (see Clark & Goetz, 1994; De Leon, 1992; Orr & Stoker, 1994). The UK, for example, shows that it is possible to organize relations between state and market in a way that minimizes direct business influence on local politics. It is true, as Cox (1995) argues, that the outcome of distributional conflicts over local economic development policy cannot be taken for granted. Yet, the combination of relative economic decline and rampant neo-liberalism in the UK has undermined this system and led to political efforts, albeit with moderate success, to “Americanize” UK local governance (Ward, 1996; Wolman, 1992). These efforts have strived to create urban regeneration partnerships in which local business elites play a political role. In a favorable economic and political environment, it is possible to defer, or re-distribute costs within the state and/or the market. In the post-war UK, these costs were borne at the national level. But there has been a pay-off over the past 25 years with draconian year-on-year cuts in local services, marketization, and a squeeze on local political autonomy (Davies, 2000, 2001).

Elkin was writing during difficult economic times, but for the past few years, the US has gone through a sustained period of economic growth. It could be argued, therefore, that his concerns for the future of liberal democracy were exaggerated. After years of economic growth, the conditions for creating institutions that support the commercial republic should be more favorable. Yet there are strong grounds for doubting that the requisite balance between the demands of business and the needs of the wider citizenry in local politics is being constituted. Stone’s (2000) latest work, co-authored with Pierannunzi, argues that Atlanta’s regime has not established an agenda to tackle poverty and social problems. The problems of mobilizing a coalition in Atlanta with sufficient resources to pursue educational reform, for example, have proved as intransigent as ever. More worrying is the continued growth of inequality. Edward Luttwak, a Washington-based strategy consultant who is no egalitarian, describes a process of *turbo-capitalism* in which “The United States is on its way to acquiring the income distribution characteristics of a Third World country” (Luttwak, 1999, p. 67). The gap between rich and poor continues to grow, and deterioration in the relative position of the lower classes has the effect of exacerbating social exclusion, even when absolute income levels are rising (Callinicos, 2000). Yet, according to Luttwak, living standards in the US have actually declined in absolute terms over the past 20 years. He states that the average income of non-supervisory American employees has declined from \$8.40 per hour in 1978, bottoming out at \$7.52 in 1990 and again reaching \$7.66 by 1997 (Luttwak, 1999). At the same time, the average income of the wealthiest fifth of society grew dramatically to nearly 20 times the average income of the poorest fifth (Luttwak, 1999).

The end of the American boom adds weight to this analysis. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (2001), America has been in recession since March 2001. The atrocity in New York on September 11 can only make things worse as shown by a dramatic slump in the fortunes of the airline industry. Add to this misfortune an America whose standards of democratic evaluation are under critical scrutiny following the 2000 presidential election, and the prospects for building the commercial republic in US cities appear to be getting worse.

SPECTERS OF MARX

Even at the height of the ideological backlash against Marx following the fall of Communism, his specter could be seen as a warning against liberal complacency. An investment banker

in *The New Yorker* (Cassidy, 1997), described him as “the next big thinker” with much to say about political corruption, monopolization, alienation, inequality and global markets (p. 248). Derrida (1994), in a critique of Fukayama, notes that:

[N]ever have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history . . . let us never neglect this macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated (p. 85).

It is arguable that Elkin, at least, left the door open to Marxism. His analysis of liberal democracy certainly echoes Marxist thinking. In his critique of Castells (1977), Elkin (1979) warned that urban scholars would face “intellectual ruin” if they did not maintain a “sense of the larger political economy and Marxism” (p. 23). Thankfully, intellectual ruin did not follow but it may be useful to reflect again on Marx. Elkin and Stone moved away from Marxism in part because of their normative commitments but also because they associated it with structuralism. This association is misplaced because it conflates Marxism with a small, if influential, anti-humanist trend developed by Althusser and his followers (Rees, 1998). It is arguable, therefore, that the Marxian baby has been thrown out with the Althusserian bath water. Elkin’s critical reading of Marxism may also arise, like Stone’s (1980, 1998a) from his Weberian understanding of class. He explains the ruling class thesis in the terms of elite theory, i.e., status (Elkin, 1985b). Read as the self-conscious action of a fully rational elite, class domination is indeed implausible. For classical Marxists, however, class is a relational concept that exists only by virtue of its relationship to another (Callinicos, 1987). Domination and ideological hegemony derive primarily from this relationship not from command power, although it may be exercised.

Based on his reading of Lukes (1974), Elkin (1987, 1994) acknowledges that ideological hegemony is more than command power. It is also a process where political decisions are routinized through institutionally mediated structures, a process which Braybrooke (1985), one of Elkin’s collaborators, describes as reprivatization. Ideological hegemony is, therefore, a consequence of the exercise of systemic power. Marxism too relies on a concept of systemic power, where social practices can result in domination without intent on the part of the superordinate power, although intent may be present. Just as Stone’s systemic power leads to a logic of collaboration between government and business, so Marx’s analysis of capitalism predicts a tendency among subordinate (and superordinate) classes to behave in ways that favor practices of accumulation and domination until periods of crisis call such behavior into question. This analysis does not require a conspiracy on the part of a homogenous ruling elite any more than that of regime theory. The difference is that for Marxists, systemic power is embodied in tendencies realized by the social practice of capitalism, those which produce the economic crises that Elkin recognizes, but cannot explain or rectify. Add to this a humanistic reading of Marx, one which denies a complete epistemological break between the ideological and the scientific Marx, and it is apparent that Marxism is not reductionist or determinist (Molyneux, 1995; Rees, 1998). As Callinicos (1987), a social theorist in the classical Marxist tradition argues, social structures are realized only through the decisions and actions of agents. This position is distinctive from structural Marxism, allowing a subjective role for agents in determining the outcomes of problems generated by deeply institutionalized social practices, like the market.

A perspective of this sort offers a more solid basis upon which to understand the wider dynamics in political economy without discarding agency. But such a formulation might be fatal

to the normative project, the commercial republic. If the dominant social practice of market capitalism undermines the prospects for sustainable and equitable regime politics, is a commercial republic viable or worth pursuing? Urban theorists including Harding (1996), Lauria (1997), and Painter (1997), have responded to criticisms of regime theory, ironically enough, by attempting to re-integrate it with the offspring of Althusserian Marxism: regulation theory (Boyer, 1990). The difficulty with this approach is that the theories are ontologically incommensurable. Regulation theory is a theory of crisis derived from structuralism whereas regime theory explicitly rejects Marxism for neo-pluralism in which crisis is not a significant variable. Not surprisingly, Stone (1998a) himself regards these perspectives as incompatible.

Marxism is not, of course, the only possible solution. A neo-classical explanation of economics would be more amenable to the market-led commercial republic. However, it would also encounter problems of theoretical commensurability, challenging regime theory's concern with structure and Stone's belief in an underlying social-purposive dimension to human behavior. Keynesian economic strategies appear to have much greater synergy with the goal of creating a commercial republic. However, this is the kind of strategy that Elkin (1987) seems pessimistic about. He believes, after all, believes that government efforts at reform will be impeded by the "very workings of the political economy" (p. 181). Furthermore, post-war economic experiments in demand management are widely perceived to have failed, giving rise to the current period of neo-liberal ascendancy.

Nevertheless, regime theory needs to address this problem. Without a credible prescription for sustainable economic growth within the market economy, the road to sustainable, equitable, regime governance appears closed. In the absence of such a prescription one option for scholars, concerned on the one hand with a structuring analysis of society and on the other with ameliorating inequality, is a critical re-engagement with Marxism.

CONCLUSION

This understanding of regime theory as a theory of structuring reveals serious theoretical and empirical difficulties for its advocates. The heart of the problem is the limited theorization of the way economic forces affect local political institutions and the balance of power within them. It is not enough to acknowledge the influence of the market economy on local political processes, it is also necessary to explain how fluctuations in the economy enable and constrain political options. The absence of this explanation weakens the ability of regime theorists to explain city politics. They can tell us that the political agency of individuals and regimes matters in determining the trajectories of US cities but not how much it matters. Additionally, both the minimal objective of regime theory (ameliorating business preeminence in urban politics) and the maximum objective (the commercial republic) appear excessively optimistic. Recent trends suggest that the pessimism of Elkin and Stone is justified. Regime theory, understood as a multi-level analysis, needs to find a convincing answer to these problems.

In his debate with Cox (Cox & Mair, 1988, 1989), Stone (1991) draws on an essay by Berlin who quotes the Greek poet Archilochus: "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (p. 295). The fox has breadth; the hedgehog has depth. Stone is claiming that he shares the fox's interest in plurality and a wide range of explanatory tactics, whereas Cox is more impressed by the hedgehog's strategy of trying to explain variety through one great and overarching truth. Cox, says Stone, is arguing for a view of urban politics centered on structure, whereas he is arguing that a pluralistic explanation, centered on agency, also has its virtues. There is value in both approaches, argues Stone, and one should be both a hedgehog and a fox. The argument advanced here acknowledges Stone's point, that the fox has many

virtues, but it contends that regime theory must think again about the hedgehog. An analysis of agency in local politics may help explain why favorable socioeconomic conditions do not always result in regime change. But it does not solve the problem of why socioeconomic conditions are so often deeply unfavorable to regime change, or why favorable conditions have proved difficult to sustain long enough for progressive coalitions to become sustainable. This is where a return to Marx may be fruitful. A deeper analysis of structural problems in market economies along the lines suggested by Marxism does not preclude a concern with agency. Rather, it requires multi-level analysis over time in which the anatomy of structure itself is as important as the interplay between structures and the agents who create and sustain them.

The most important argument that follows from this discussion is that regime theorists could usefully situate their work in a wider understanding of systemic trends and confront the implications of these trends for normative projects. Can they provide a positive answer to Elkin's (1987) question of "whether a regime dedicated to both popular control and a property-based market system can thrive?" (p. 17). Is it possible to identify a trend toward more equitable regimes in the US or elsewhere? If not, is the commercial republic a realizable goal? Can scholars better explain the circumstances in which local political actors choose instrumentally rational or social-purposeful behavior? Given that social structures and political agency both matter, is it possible to achieve a more sophisticated understanding of the structuring process? Can Marxism, or other theories, help in this task? Scholars of urban politics may find further engagement with these questions fruitful, whether concerned with the minutiae of local politics or the impact of structural developments at the global scale.

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