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## Local Autonomy, Development and Spatial Justice, and Lessons from the United States

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### ABSTRACT

There is a long history in the countries of Western Europe of local and regional development policy. After the Second World War, central governments implemented policies with a view to achieving greater inter-urban and inter-regional equity. Since the early 1980s, some devolution of responsibilities for development has been a common tendency. The emphasis has shifted from spatial justice to national growth but distributional concerns are still evident. This raises the question of the relation between local autonomy in development policy and spatial justice. In this paper I take a comparative view of this, drawing on the case of the US, and using England as a particular exemplar of the West European instance. This sheds light on the very particular meaning assumed by local autonomy in recent reforms. The American version is much more radical and results in a very different approach to development policy: one which makes questions of spatial justice utterly irrelevant. This raises the question of just why the cases differ so much. Differences in state structure, and more fundamentally, the social process underpinning state structure are crucial and help shed light on exactly why development policy and local autonomy assume the form that they do in England, and by extension in the countries of Western Europe.

**Keywords:** uneven development, development policy, local autonomy, comparative study, spatial justice

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## Context

Since at least the immediate postwar years, the interest in local and regional development as a policy focus has been universal across the developed countries. It is now taken for granted. But what policy means, its purposes, its modes of delivery, have varied a great deal. They have varied over time and also from one country to another. In Western Europe, the initial approach was for the central government to take the lead. Financial incentives were offered to firms to locate branch plants in areas more susceptible to unemployment, typically poorer areas, with a view to reducing interregional differences. In an important sense regional policy at that time was an extension of the welfare state; it aimed at improving the life chances of the less privileged. Over the last forty years the emphasis has shifted. Now the localities and sometimes the regions are supposed to play a more central role. The goals of policy have also changed somewhat: more a matter of stimulating national growth than in ameliorating regionalized hardship. In the US, on the other hand, there was never much interest in mitigating uneven development and therefore in mitigating spatial injustice. Furthermore, and in additional contrast, local governments, along with some support from respective state Departments of Development, have always taken the lead. The federal government, on the other hand, has been noticeably passive. Policy, therefore, has a history in Western Europe that is absent in the US.

The case of the United States is interesting because it suggests that a comparative approach might help shed some light on recent changes in Western Europe: on what local autonomy means for development policy, and under what circumstances it can be turned to mitigating regional or inter-urban inequalities. In this paper the immediate focus is on the case of England<sup>2</sup>. While it is the case that in virtually all the countries of Western Europe there has been a turn to enhanced local autonomy as a way of stimulating local economies, there are also variations which are hard to deal with in a single paper<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, what they do have in common is a sharp difference with the American approach.

In the Western European case ideas of spatial justice have been central to the debate about local development. This has been understood as an evening out of regional differences in life chances: most notably reducing interregional differences in unemployment and incomes. Local development is understood as what enhances incomes and reducing unemployment. The problem has been, how to spread this out more evenly. More recently, as frustrations with central government policy have grown, the question of local autonomy has surged to the fore. Just what it means is

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2. Not the United Kingdom, therefore, since the legislation to be discussed here does not pertain to the devolved authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

3. For a discussion of these and their commonality, see Cox (2016: 178-187.)

vague. While it certainly means more control over the levers of development, over decisions about transport and land use and sectoral experimentation, whether it should include autonomy in raising local government revenues has been far less clear. In practice, we can be sure of one thing: local governments remain creatures of the state as a whole and as such will remain under the supervision of its central branches. It is, therefore, a very qualified local autonomy that has emerged.

In the US spatial justice means the same thing, but in development practice it is almost entirely disregarded. The local governments who are the major agents of development policy, are indifferent to the effects that their policies might have on people elsewhere. This reflects the meaning of local autonomy in US development politics: local governments are to an unusual degree autonomous in finding the revenues to fund their activities, including schools. Supervision by the state governments of which they are the creatures, is minimal.

In understanding the nexus of relations around development, local autonomy, and therefore state structure, and spatial justice, we need to situate it with reference to the totality of the social process. Regardless of country, local and regional development policy has common roots and only when those roots have been interrogated can we turn to how the policy trajectory in England has differed from that in the US. These common roots lie in the contradictions of the capitalist development process and its accompanying class relations as they play out over space. It is with these that we start.

This order is worth emphasizing. In the literature on local and regional development policy and its politics there is a vast number of country-specific, quite detailed, empirical studies. A common shortcoming is a failure to situate. There are at least two omissions worth noting. The first is an inattention to the significance of capitalism as a mode of production. Local development policy in Western Europe and North America emerges as a response to the contradictions of capitalism; notably, as will be explored below, its uneven geographic development. The second point is that how these contradictions are resolved depends on particular features of respective social formations. These social formations comprise distinct ensembles of class structures, divisions of labor, state forms, discourses and lots more in which the different aspects internalize one another. One cannot make sense of the American state – so important for the provisions it makes for local development – without situating it with respect to other aspects of that society. This then creates the possibility of a sort of hermeneutic: in the case of this paper, understanding the West European case in terms of the American one. But more fundamentally, any capitalist

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social formation is exactly that: capitalist, and, in its particular expressions, both facilitating and limited by the logic of accumulation.

### **Uneven development and its contradictions**

A necessary context for any discussion of local and regional policy is geographically uneven development: how it comes about and how it is implicated in the accumulation process. Production is always highly localized and depends on the creation of physical and social infrastructures of long life. These are then incorporated into what Harvey (1985a) has called "a structured coherence": a highly concrete set of social relations, setting up expectations, legitimating particular practices, and creating an environment of predictability. This then facilitates production and therefore accumulation. It is, however, utterly non-portable to other places. Movement is costly in terms of time and money.

This is significant because economic geography is subject to change as the conditions of production change: a result of the search by individual capitals for some competitive advantage. It shifts, therefore, in response to changes in sectoral composition: a pattern of declining areas and new growth points. Transformed technologies revolutionize the locational reasoning of firms. Changes in the technical division of labor, the increased subdivision of tasks and the emergence of research and development and a stronger managerial presence also bring about shifts in economic geography and in the pattern of incomes (Massey 1984.)

This is accompanied by movements of labor and capital, most notably from declining areas to those that are growing. Accordingly the geography of value flow shifts, no longer supporting employment in some places, but expanding it elsewhere. Values in place are threatened. The investments of long life made by firms and, in support of them, by local branches of the state – the whole physical infrastructure of production – can be left stranded as value no longer flows through them. This can threaten their amortization. The social relations so crucial to the operations of the firm are no longer of value. They can relocate but only at the cost of writing off very considerable investments and of building up a new fabric of relations of trust with lenders and suppliers, investing in the training of a new labor force, and so on. Meanwhile the fact that flows of value through the area have declined has implications for workers: for the value of the houses that they have bought; for their social relations as family members move to work elsewhere; and for the viability of different forms of social life, sociability and public provision – social clubs, football teams, schools, churches, the local press, public services of various sorts.

Historically this set the stage for new forms of state intervention into what would come to be called, at least in the English-speaking countries, "local and regional development". In the immediate postwar period, and aside from Spain and Portugal, all the countries of Western Europe engaged in policies designed to improve incomes and increase employment in areas that were in danger of being overtaken by changes in the space economy: most notably areas that had specialized in coal mining and heavy industry, including iron and steel and shipbuilding. Special attention was also given to the development of areas deemed backward; most notably Western France, Southern Italy, and the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Romus (1958) provided a particularly good and comprehensive survey of these policies. Areas were designated and firms were offered subsidies to locate production there. Italian policies with respect to the industrialization of the Mezzogiorno are well known<sup>4</sup>. These were policies designed and implemented by national governments with a view to evening out the geography of life chances: an emphasis on equality of opportunity and of outcomes that fitted nicely with prevailing sentiments about the importance of the welfare state. The role of local governments in this was strictly limited: planning was a matter for the central government and all that local governments had to do was make the industrial sites available. This would continue until the mid to late 70s. Since then, and in the wake of the sharp downturn in the global economy, there has been change. Central government has shifted some of its responsibility for local and regional development to the localities and regions themselves. This has been accompanied by some alteration in the purpose of policy: less redistributive among regions and cities and more about harnessing geography to national growth. Nevertheless, anxieties about the marginalization of particular places persist.

In short, the balance between concerns for spatial justice and national growth has shifted. In the earlier period, spatial justice prevailed though there was also some attention to national growth. Diverting industry away from major metropolitan areas to those where unemployment was more marked and to backward areas was seen as a way of not just improving life chances in the latter, but relieving pressures on job and housing markets in the former. Since the mid to late 70s, this has changed. The balance has shifted to promoting national growth by public investment in areas – like London and Paris – that show the most promise of generating export revenues, visible and invisible. Concern for areas of relatively high unemployment or low incomes has not disappeared but it has diminished.

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4. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the British government mediated a quite dramatic shift in the geography of the automobile industry. Using financial incentives and limits on expansion in existing areas of production, capacity was expanded in peripheral areas like Clydeside and Merseyside. For a discussion see Thomas and Donnelly (2000: Chapter 7.)

In the US it has been very different indeed. During the 1930s there were federal policies like rural electrification and the Tennessee Valley Authority, designed to stimulate development in rural areas and over a large part of the, then very backward, South (Cox 2016, p. 78-79.) Since then, the federal government has tended to be more a source of money and regulatory relief for the development efforts of local governments and the states: in short, more passive. This is in contrast to the sorts of active stances taken up by governments in Western Europe, and still to the present day<sup>5</sup>. The same goes for the individual states: more a source of support than of independent initiative. Initiative, rather, has remained with the local governments and the objectives of policy have been quite different from those in Western Europe. Local governments compete with each other for inward investment, so questions of spatial justice are of absolutely no concern. This needs to be emphasized. Rather the goal has been expanding the local economy. The primary driver of this has been what is referred to as the local growth coalition<sup>6</sup>. As per the contradictions of uneven development outlined above, it is the fixity of the conditions of production that has been at the center of this. Developers with their investments in land, in actual developments, and in a local knowledge that assumes heightened importance in the light of very considerable institutional variation from one local government to another, take the lead (Cox and Wood 1997.) Local government is highly complicit with this development agenda. In the US local autonomy means not just policy autonomy but autonomy in finding the money. Local governments depend on their own revenue raising efforts: taxes on property, retail sales and incomes in particular. There are state and federal subsidies but with few exceptions they have little redistributive intent. And there again, by definition local governments are unable to move somewhere else in order to embellish their revenues. Accordingly, how the new investment might affect jobs elsewhere – it might be a case, for example, of a plant closing in another city – is of no concern. Spatial justice is an idea that is foreign to local and regional development policy in the US: a major contrast with the West European, including the English, case. To understand why this is, we need to turn to quite profound differences in respective social formations, focusing now on the contrast between the United States and the United Kingdom: or more specifically for some purposes here, England, since with the delegation of some powers to Scotland and Wales, some of the important legislation now only applies to the former.

### **The difference that countries make**

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5. Though only after a struggle in which federal planning of regional development had been a serious option. See Katznelson and Pietykowski (1991.)

6. The major reference here is Molotch (1976.) For a sympathetic critique of this work see Cox (2017.)

There are obvious differences in state structure. The British state is highly centralized and unitary. What local governments can do has always been strictly circumscribed and subject to more central government supervision. Recent moves to local autonomy have changed this somewhat but the contrast with the US remains more than impressive. The American state is a radical federation in which powers are shared between federal and state governments and where the individual states have delegated very considerable powers and responsibilities to local governments. The latter requires emphasis because it helps to locate a crucial reason for differences in policy.

In the US, growth coalitions take the lead in promoting local development but local government is an essential member. It wants to participate, and in virtue of a dependence on local revenues it has to participate. Historically this has been in strong contrast to the British case where local autonomy is clearly less radical and less likely to bring about competition between local governments. It also helps to explain why local development is not the overwhelming policy concern that it is in American cities.

Different state structures also mean different roles for the political parties. In the US the parties play very little role in local development policy. Representation rather, is highly territorialized. Congressional representatives divided by party but sharing a particular metropolitan area are likely to combine their forces on issues that affect it. In the United Kingdom, representation is territorialized in the sense that Members of Parliament represent particular geographical areas or Parliamentary constituencies, but they tend to work through their political parties to obtain something of joint interest.

Only to a limited degree, though, can state structure clarify the concrete ensembles of relations bringing together development policy, local autonomy and development goals: as in, for whom is policy supposed to work. State structures reflect, as well as reinforce, certain distinct aspects of a country-specific society. As noted earlier, Harvey (1985a) talks about structured coherences: particular ensembles of internally related aspects of society including class, the state, the division of labor, meanings and social hierarchy. The United States is a very different sort of society than is the United Kingdom or, indeed, any of the countries of Western Europe. The conception of local autonomy that is facilitated through the state and practiced there is one that West Europeans, including the British, would have a great deal of trouble with. The same applies to the goals of development policy. Unlike the West Europeans, the Americans have never regarded spatial justice as a policy priority; rather it is local

growth that is foregrounded and again, there are good reasons why this is that are rooted in the sort of society that is the United States.

For there are important differences in emphasis, in the degree to which particular categories central to a capitalist society, have positive resonance. Consider the following contrasts:

- Individual / Society
- Markets / The state
- Competition / Monopoly

The emphasis in the American case in each instance is on the first term. In Western Europe it is otherwise. Struggles around the role of the state in society, including in local economic development, are exemplary. State provision of healthcare and of housing have been resisted in the US with a vehemence lacking in Western Europe. Competition, it is argued, means efficiency in provision as opposed to the monopoly of the state. In the United Kingdom and in Western Europe as a whole, there is none of the American negativism towards the state: which helps account for the enhanced role of the state and of state planning in local economic development there. It is, moreover, by discursive appeal to the categories of individual, market and competition that capital in the US has made it so difficult for the labor movement there to form an effective counter-pole. Labor unions, it is argued, are like the state, since they represent monopolies and stifle individual initiative and the virtues of self-reliance. The best form of society is one that sets the individual free; individual rights trump individual responsibilities to others. The market and its hidden hand – not the state or labor unions – will ensure the happiness of everyone.

These contrasts are rooted in profound differences of a socio-historical character. For a start the US was never a feudal or a peasant society. There were none of the struggles around the emergence of a capitalist society: struggles, for example, around collective dispossession, and the disintegration of ways of life where exchange played only a very limited role. There is, therefore, no trace of what E P Thompson (1971) called “the moral economy of the crowd” where custom and tradition were appealed to in defense of the old predominance of use value over exchange value; and of rights to subsistence as opposed to the right to sell for the highest price.

Likewise, the notion of class and class relations features much more prominently in the Western European political consciousness. The labor movement in the form of unions and political parties achieved a strength that it never had in the US. Accordingly the struggle for social justice, including spatial justice, is more clearly



apparent and set within a distinct world view: more ideological, therefore, whereas in the United States labor unions have had difficulty getting beyond the status of one interest group among many (Lowi, 1979.) In contrast to the US, all the countries of Western Europe have social democratic parties, which helps explain the relative skepticism towards the market and an embrace of state intervention that is very un-American. The balance of power is entirely different. Any party of the right in Western Europe has to be looking over its shoulder to the next election if it contemplates rolling back what the political party representatives of the labor movement have achieved.

Finally there is the fact that in Western Europe, including the United Kingdom, a highly centralized state was a legacy from pre-capitalist times. This is the absolutist state in which power radiated downwards from the monarch and in which all forms of local government existed at his or her pleasure. This was the sort of state inherited by constitutional forms of government. Accordingly the center was the obvious place at which to apply pressure on behalf of change or indeed to defend the status quo against change. In these regards the US was again entirely different. The fear of government excess resulting from the colonial experience would then result in a constitution marked by the famous "checks and balances", of which a radical federalism was one aspect.

With this as background, the particular nexus of local autonomy, development policy and spatial justice that is so characteristic of the West European case, including England, begins to make sense. Local autonomy American-style is unthinkable. It has to be constrained by central oversight and control, and limited in terms of how local government revenues are generated for fear of lapsing into the sort of territorial competition which is the hallmark of the American case. Spatial justice is something sought after, which it has to be in countries where there is a legacy of strong labor movements, even if their power is now greatly diminished. Territorial competition would result in its very antithesis. On the other hand, local and regional policy has always had other goals, most notably ones of promoting national growth. In the United Kingdom the government has been promoting a view that would put the emphasis on particular economic sectors: something unthinkable in the US where the state is not supposed to choose winners and therefore losers. Rather competition is supposed to be the effective medium.

This makes absolute sense in terms of the sort of society that the US is, and the sort of state structure that that society has selected in and sanctioned. The dispersion of powers through a radical form of federation, and then through delegation to local governments, is entirely consistent with the belief that the best state is a weak one.

This, in a context of uneven development, and anxieties about the fixity and mobility of capital, then creates a situation where local governments compete with one another for investment. The state, at least in the form of the local governments, becomes commodified. They sell themselves as sites for inward investment. Meanwhile, the same dispersion of powers gives the advantage to more territorial understandings of politics and works against those of class. Labor unions threaten to undermine local advantage in the competition for inward investment and are therefore a bad thing. Any lingering anxieties about spatial justice take a distant second place to concerns for enhancing local growth. Local autonomy, therefore, means very different things in the two countries and is attached to quite different approaches to development policy. We now examine local development policy in the two countries in more detail.

### **The English case**

In the United Kingdom, up until the late 70s, and as we have seen, state provision for promoting local development, as elsewhere in Western Europe, had been highly centralized. There was a policy of directing employment to what were regarded as economically vulnerable areas: in particular, and for the most part, those where the economic base depended on coal, shipbuilding or iron and steel. Policy worked through financial incentives. There were also attempts to discourage investment in parts of the country where there was strong pressure on local labor markets. These policies had, at least as it was expressed publicly, a redistributive intent: they were intended to achieve some measure of spatial justice.

There is evidence that was indeed some convergence in regional products per capita (Dunford, 1997), suggesting that spatial justice was being enhanced: but after the mid-70s, and as the old policies were retired, divergence resumed (Dunford, 1997; Martin and Sunley, 1997.) Exactly why this was is complex, but the turn to the market and the retreat from a more interventionist national government was certainly part of it. In this regard, the European Union assumes some significance, and in several ways. On the one hand, in virtue of the dismantling of barriers to trade, it reflected the sharp neo-liberal turn in policy. It also had its own policies regarding aiding distressed regions. This required serious limitation in areas henceforth eligible in the United Kingdom. Through the creation of a single market, the EU also resulted in a rationalization of firm production organization: notably concentration in fewer branch plants and so fewer branch plants to be relocated to distressed areas. Extension to Eastern Europe and its lower wage levels, then meant the relocation of

branch plants to those countries, leaving even fewer for redistribution through regional policy (Cox, 2016, p. 202-205.)

Accordingly uneven development reasserted itself, and from the 1980s on it took the form of what was called “the North/South divide”; or more accurately between London and the Southeast on the one hand, and the rest of the country on the other. This has been the basis for the debate about “rebalancing the space economy”. How to promote growth outside of London and the Southeast and to do it in a way which could generate new industries capable of generating export revenues? In short: The debate about development policy has revolved around issues of spatial equity and national growth, with some arguing that dispersion from London and the Southeast would serve both ends.

As elsewhere in Western Europe, one response was devolution to what were called Regional Development Agencies, but the powers accorded to them were very limited, and they were funded to a degree that can only be regarded as derisory (Morgan 2001). They were abandoned in 2010 and have been replaced by two different initiatives, both devolving some responsibility to the localities. Again, the pattern remains one of strong central control and monitoring, particularly in the form of fiscal levers and national land use planning policy and directives, and this merits emphasis.

The first of these initiatives has been the creation, from 2009 on, of what are called “combined authorities” (henceforth, CAs.) Each of these brings together several adjoining local governments. This is partly with a view to exploiting economies of agglomeration as per the new wisdom of development planning. They are formed on local request from groups of local governments who then enter into area-specific negotiations with the government regarding devolution of powers and funding. Their main purpose is in the provision of physical and social infrastructure to serve a wide variety of firms across the whole area (Fai, 2018, p. 40.) Most of their revenue comes from the central government and consists of monies that would have come into the area anyway (Grant Thornton, 2017, p. 9); this has to be spent in certain ways dictated by the government. The major funding power that they have, and which offers some promise for the future, is to borrow money for transport investments.

They therefore stand somewhat higher in the hierarchy of development agencies than the thirty-nine Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which cover the whole of England, and which comprise the second post-2010 major initiative. Each of these is made up of a mix of local businesspeople, and representatives of local government and of higher education. They are charged with promoting the economic development of respective regions, including the production of a Regional Economic

Strategy. Taken alongside the Combined Authorities, the emphasis here is different: much more sectoral. This means identifying and promoting strategic opportunities for the area, by, for example, encouraging collaboration between firms and local universities.

The division of labor between the CAs and the LEPs is fairly clear and non-conflictual. On the other hand, the division of responsibilities between them and the local governments which retain power over the planning of housing, is far from harmonious and a source of serious contradictions (Boddy and Hickman, 2018, p. 214; Boddy and Hickman 2013, p. 751). The CAs and LEPs lack any sort of control over housing provision. This is crucial since, if growth is to be stimulated, there has to be housing for the additional workers. A historical reprise is useful.

There is a long history of planning and supervising the provision of housing at a national level and this has tended to increase over time. In the immediate post-war period there was something called development control. Local authorities devised land use plans but development in accordance with the plan required permission. Permission might be turned down on numerous grounds, like failure to provide for adequate access. But if it was turned down, the person requesting permission could appeal to the central government. An inspector would then adjudicate, taking into account national needs. In other words, a mix of local control subject to central supervision (Hall and Clawson, 1973, p. 47-52.) Later local plans themselves would be subject to government approval and had to take into account the plans of neighboring local authorities: these were the Structure Plans. But in the context of a persistent housing shortage, the Labour Party government in power between 1996 and 2010, started imposing housing targets on a region-by-region basis. These were in accord with forecasts of population growth. The location of the housing requested by the central government was then negotiated among constituent local authorities.

There was resistance to these targets, and it was particularly strong in those parts of the country where general forecasts of housing need were, *per necesity*, raised: so particularly in London and the Southeast and especially in the more residentially desirable, middle class constituencies that typically elect Conservative MPs. Not surprisingly, and to gain electoral clout, on their election in 2010, and despite the necessity of a coalition government, the dominant Conservatives ended the targets. They then assigned responsibility for estimates of housing need to local governments themselves, albeit with important qualifications.

The major piece of legislation was the Localism Act of 2011. Housing targets were now to be developed locally and incorporated into a Local Plan. In devising the plan consideration had to be taken of the housing needs of neighboring local

governments that might not have sufficient land to satisfy them: a nod, therefore, in the direction of the provisions made by the now abandoned Structure Plans. In addition, the Localism Act expressed a presumption in favor of economic growth and infrastructure provision and as time has elapsed, housing supply too (Boddy and Hickman, 2018, p. 210.) The Local Plan then had to be approved by the national planning inspectorate.

The tendency has been for local governments to succumb to the temptation to provide, in their plans, provisions for housing which are serious under-estimates of what is needed. As Boddy and Hickman have indicated, this has already been a problem in the West of England Combined Authority, which centers on Bristol and covers a major growth area in the country (Boddy and Hickman, 2013, p. 751). There is also the problem of collaboration between local governments in the CAs: some local governments simply do not have the land to provide more housing and have to rely on their neighbors. Previously, this was taken into account in Structure Plans but now there is simply the request for consideration of the needs of neighboring local governments.

Two concluding points can now be made. The first is that since the 1980s, and with the changes in the developmental scalar division of labor, spatial justice has become a subordinate consideration. The CAs in combination with the LEPs are much more about rebalancing the economy, spatially and sectorally, than about achieving a more distributionally just geography. The concern is to relieve the pressure on London and the Southeast and their highly stressed housing markets and to create new growth industries elsewhere in the country.

Second, class considerations, incorporated into party agenda, are to the forefront. The antagonism to new housing is a homeowner one, and is broadly along amenity grounds: concerns about congestion, the preservation of open space and what resultant implications for home values. This is an old story in the United Kingdom, going back at least to the 1980s (Barlow and Savage, 1986.) The issues were then rehearsed again in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the struggle over so-called "garden grabbing" (Cox, 2016, p. 266-268.) A Labour government, in an attempt to break the deadlock over housing supply had encouraged the use of brownfield sites and had included the gardens of existing housing under that category. Between 1997 and 2008 one in four new housing starts was on such land. Lots were purchased, the existing housing unit torn down and replaced with several units. More affluent areas were particularly targeted as a result of the generally larger lots that accompanied housing there. The resistance was then exploited by the Conservative Party and the Labour government was persuaded to exclude lots from the brownfield designation.

## Local autonomy and development, U.S. style

In comparison with the West European countries, to say that local and regional development in the US is different, is an understatement. It is very bottom-up, and owes little to conscious design. It results in what can only be called a market-in-locations in which local growth coalitions, represented by local governments compete to attract in new investment (Blair, Fichtenbaum and Swaney, 1984; Feiock, 2002). Class in an explicit sense, hardly enters in. It is, in other words, a very different story from that which has recently unfolded in Western Europe, including England.<sup>7</sup>

Rather, there was no reorganization of state structure for purposes of encouraging local development as there was in Western Europe. Rather, given the need to promote local development, certain inherited features of the American state were mobilized to that end. Harvey describes the historical conjuncture that led to this:

“The more corporations used their powers of dispersal... the less urban regions competed with each other on the basis of their industrial mix and the more they were forced to compete in terms of the attractions they had to offer to corporate investment as labor and commodity markets and as bundles of physical and social assets that corporations could exploit to their own advantage”. (1985b, p. 203)

So it was a particular crisis for local economies that led to intervention and then to competition. This was facilitated by particular features of the American state. In the first place, the crisis in local economies subsequent to changes in national economic geography, and particularly the rise of the branch plant, profoundly affected local government. This is because, as pointed out above, local governments in the US depend disproportionately on revenues raised within their boundaries. There are various forms of subsidy from state and federal governments but these are not designed so as to mitigate shortfalls in revenue resulting from the contraction of a local economy.

Second, although the structure of the American state constrains local governments to take an intense interest in the development of respective economies, it also provides them with a remarkable array of powers that can be put to exactly that purpose. And in contrast to the English case, this is virtually without any oversight from the state governments that delegated these powers to them in the first place:

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7. It is also one with a good deal of continuity. While there were shifts in emphasis in the goals and state structuring of policy in the latter, in the US it has been business as usual.

- The power to plan land-use with no state supervision of the sort characteristic of England. There is no provision for consistency between the plans of adjacent local governments; and there is no right of appeal of land use decisions made by local government, except to the court system for possible breaches of the law.
- The ability to annex land that is not part of a municipality: So long as annexation law is observed, again there is no state supervision, which is in contrast to the English case, where it requires a Private Act of Parliament. This is important since annexation typically is of rural land where land assembly is easier: something attractive to the contemporary developer penchant for land-extensive uses like regional shopping centers, industrial and office parks and large residential developments that incorporate golf courses, riding trails and lots of green space.
- Finally, there is the power to offer financial incentives to firms considering locating in a municipality. This usually takes the form of an abatement of local taxes. In England there have always been very severe limits on this sort of practice.

This does not mean that local governments have all the powers that they need in order to develop respective economies. The states, and in particular the federal government, have crucial regulatory powers as well as deep pockets. But in order to turn these to local advantage, they have to be accessed. Once again, the dispersed nature of power in the American state can be harnessed to that purpose. A major channel through which local demands are made is what is called “the committee system”. All legislation has to go through a committee of legislators. The legislators from particular districts or states typically sit on those committees most relevant to the economies of their home districts or states and get to amend it or even reject it (Cox, 2016, p. 305-307.) Parenthetically, this implies that when one talks about local autonomy it cannot be just a matter of what local governments are allowed to do and what lies beyond their powers. Rather the local power to access higher levels in the state’s scalar division of labor also has to be taken into account.

### **Concluding comments**

Within the last ten years, and as we saw, a major local development initiative in England has been the creation of Combined Authorities with devolved responsibilities for physical and social infrastructure. Each one is negotiated *ad hoc*

with the central government concluding in a CA-specific “deal”. In a recent article David Waite and Kevin Morgan (2019) have raised concerns about what they imply for increased territorial competition and, concomitantly, for spatial justice: more in the first case and less in the latter. The focus of the deals is indeed growth and the asymmetric bargaining means that the resultant CAs are not operating on a level playing field. Even so, I think that they overstate the dangers. In order for local autonomy to do serious damage to spatial justice it has to be of a more radical sort, notably that apparent in the US. It is radical there because not only do local governments have the powers to compete; given their reliance on their own revenue raising, they have the desire. In England, it has been quite different, and as a result of a social formation that for historical reasons contrasts strongly with that of the United States. A strong central state delegates powers of a very limited sort and still subjects local governments to strong supervision. And to the extent that local governments still rely on central government for their revenue, the incentive to get involved in local development will remain limited<sup>8</sup>. As I have urged elsewhere (Cox, 2009) this conclusion applies to the other countries of Western Europe. While things might have changed, they have not changed very much. The American example shows what radical autonomy is and what it means for spatial justice.

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8. There is a hint of change, though, as Christophers (2019) has recently argued. Local governments in England are increasingly involving themselves in development activities as government austerity limits their revenues and they find it difficult to fund the services that they are statutorily committed to provide.



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