

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
MEMORANDUM #6

FROM: MILTON KOTLER

SUBJECT: THE URBAN POLITY*

Political thought selects its preferred realities. That makes politics worth thinking about and credible enough for personal action. So I will indulge my taste.

The first reality is that Americans live an urban life, 70 per cent of us more than others. The social issue then is how we can fulfill urban life as a political society. For only polity can shape our association for the greater quality of our lives in public character and private order. Without polity our associations are too often mere entanglements. Our political task then begins with confronting the city confidently as the place of our lives, and to seek its political foundations.

The second reality is that the major contests of interests are taking place in our cities. It is the ground of new power drawn from old regions, and of shifting power from old urban sources to new ones. The city is the political terrain of the nation and its power is in fast motion.

Its major interest formation is the new middle class. Technology, corporate consolidation, and public economy are transforming that class from a property to wage base. It is a college educated class of salaried administrators, whose primary interest is to secure more objects and persons for service, management, and control. For this purpose the middle class needs a permanently expanding dependent clientele and enough organizational power to protect its function and expanding ranks. Service and expertise are its occupational principles. So the new class seeks to enlarge service programs; refine the qualifications of performance; and control their operation through professional organization. From whom has this new class won its power and what kind of power is it? With what other interest groups is it allied? And what, if any, is the character and organization of resistance?

Correspondingly, the lower class has been transformed from production to permanent unemployment. Its value is no longer labor, but dependency. Will it resist its caste subordination into clientelism, by the new middle class? Both groups and allied interests are in daily battle, which is manifested in the recurring disorders that surround housing, education, and welfare administration.

*Remarks introducing a staff discussion on Community Foundations at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara, California, January 8, 1965.

A related urban contest is racial conflict and the move towards integration and equality in the society. This has been taking political shape as it involves new exchanges of power for mutual interest support. These exchanges have established new associations; not only in political party consolidations, but also in social fields of understanding and action.

Fundamentally related to this contest is the violence of the war of generations taking place in the society. There is not only a numerical imbalance of age groups in the society, but a structural imbalance as well. Because of technological unemployment, rapid changes in education, the consolidation of media and consumption etc., today's youth cannot match the prescriptions of their parents about property, income, marriage, religious practice, stability, advancement, etc.. This totality of difference between age groups expresses more than typical generational tension. For there are the additional factors of urban concentration, youth organization, and reinforcement of popular culture, which have established the heroic figure and posture of youth. Youth is articulated as the romantic ideal, while failing all traditional values.

Generational exchange has been clearly ruptured. There is an ethical and moral divide. The expression of youth protest has been excluded from the political arena, while middle age has employed the political apparatus for the domestication and pacification of youth. The Job Corps of the Poverty Program is a case in point. To these political control measures, the response of youth can only be violence. This rupture, rather than racial conflict, is the basic foundation of urban violence.

Corporate power has moved its structure and influence to the cities, after a historic collusion with state governments. No longer do public land grabs and privileged tax structures suffice for corporate power. Instead, they require centralization, intellect and skill for the administration of its productive technology. For these and other reasons, the corporation has come full force to the city. Their procession requires favorable opinion to withstand public misgiving. Thus, they have come to control the media, the schools, the press, the university---either by way of ownership, contract, or public service.

How are corporations relating to other forces within the city, like the professions and political machines, and for what exchange of interest? Who do they oppose and seek to weaken? How are they winning the institutional support to develop and establish a durable rhetoric to protect their private power? Which institutions and sectors of the public will object and resist?

Federalism is also moving to the city, through the growth of direct federal-local relations in education, housing, transportation, public welfare, etc.. A nation of urban federalism is emerging, while the states gradually become regional administrations of the national government. What new governmental authority will the city get to fulfill this partnership in government, and how will it struggle with the states toward this end? What will happen to national policy when federal-urban relations and reapportionment make the national government more responsive to urban interests, power, and temperament?

The crucial issue of the public control of technology rests in the city. Here the felt effects of technology meet the popular power to question, resist, and even possibly, to democratically guide automation to better purpose. Whether democratic decision can prevail over the private control of technology is questionable. But the issue will have to be met in the city. Only there, within its visible public, can its benefits be tried. Only in the city can its issue gain fire and its judgment be assumed.

These are just some of the contests which make the city the volatile political center of the nation. Yet where is its sufficient public authority to democratically govern these resolutions? Its authority from state government is woefully inadequate to nourish the amity of new exchanges and associations which urban harmony and order require. Even more fearfully, its power is insufficient to control the tempest of power change, and mitigate the inflammations of new class domination. Social judgment is unable to govern these contests of power because there is no municipal authority sufficient to rule and compose the dimensions of these conflicts. In the absence of sufficient authority there can be no pragmatic of social judgment to achieve consensus and govern for the common interest.

From where will the city gain the necessary authority to rule its conflict and establish its peace? Hopefully, from the Federal Government, as the Executive succeeds in furthering federal-urban relations in legislation and administrative practice. The Court will help, no doubt, by identifying constitutional law with urban rights and rule, against state government domination.

Until this trend is achieved the municipal government will remain a mere administrative structure. Its slight authorities today amount to no more than the scope of discretionary power given any administrative bureaucracy. This denigration of the city as a seat of rule has been with us since the federal constitution.

The very forms of corruption typically chronicled about the political machines resemble classical varieties, not of political, but of bureaucratic corruption, --nepotism, graft, police protection, certificates of exception, purchase of privilege and office. Political corruption, on the other hand, turns more on issues of suspension of civil liberties and personal rights, restriction of votes--votes and office, denial of judicial appeal, etc.. These corruptions have been more characteristic of state governments than the city. Thus, even its corruption manifests the inadequate authority of the city to rule, rather than its degenerate capacity to do so.

Yet, so long as we fail to credit the political existence of the city, we will correspondingly fail to enhance its authority to rule. Its government will continue to exist in fact and in mind merely as an administration. In consequence, its operations will be considered technical.

The municipal reform and civil service movement in the 20's was an earlier expression of this technical view of city government. That movement failed to achieve the aspirations it sought, because the technical view of municipal government never comprehended the political problems of urban society which require political rule. With the reform movement behind us, the new program of technical administration, favoring area social planning and expertise, stands as the current version of an old misperception. It is against this new technical mission that the task of fulfilling the city as a political society must struggle.

There is both a strong and weak reason for this persistent technical view of municipal government. Taking the weak excuse first, the fever for technical expertise and area social planning expresses our kind sentiment of mass help for the vast numbers of poor, the unemployed, the help- less aged, delinquents, the Negroes, and others. We argue that speedy help for such larger numbers requires the systematic programming, administration, and expert management of a technical service organization. In failing to recognize that area social planning is more responsive to our own occupational and political interests, we also fail to credit the political nature of the resistance of the poor to the clientelism which we effect.

Turning to the stronger reason for the technical views of the problems of the city, we find that the city is not politically credited in our classic political thought of Founding Fathers, their adopted sons, the Constitution, and Supreme Court judges. The city was never a term of our classical political thought, although it has been dealt with extensively in our traditional literature of social criticism, like Steffens, Veblen, Adams, and Park. The difference that counts is that our classic political thought has a constitutional foundation.

Two features of our political classicism work to exclude the city from its attention. First, the doctrine of limited governmental authority and specific powers relegates the city to state government. Second, the political perspective of our classic thought contemplates the nation as a federal union from which the cities have been excised. Constitutional authority has been the primary issue of our political thought. To that extent, accordingly, the city has neither a place in our classic thought, nor a sufficient standing in our political process.

Liberty of private property was dear to the Constitutional framers. Accordingly, the locus of opposition, namely the cities of the populace, could not be granted legitimate political status or rule. Being certain of the democratic attack of the urban populace on property, the framers propounded what they were less certain of, namely, the inalienability of liberty and the limitation of government. Democracy and the city were left unmentioned in the argument, for the framers had little interest in preparing the historic assault of democracy of property by negative denunciations. And since law must re-enact the constitution, democracy slowly proceeds by a distended and contorted rhetoric of property.

The silence of the city also rests on the nationalism of our classic political thought, for all its federal protestations. Our constitution is national, for it designed the structure of national government. The cities, under state sovereignty were thus omitted from its attention. Hence, the Idea of the American nation grew without reference to the city and place of the populace. The Idea of our nation grew without a political idea of democracy. The connection of nation and city was lost. The conception of Nation became idealized, abstracted from the "Social Shapes", which Democritus said "menform". Conversely, the city became more sordid by political neglect. Thereafter the two terms moved from simple disassociation to real antithesis: the Nation vs. the City.

So we see how hard it has been in thought and fact to fulfill the existential polity of the city, as a real political society. As to why we should, -- the nation is our cities! Our cities are as big as the nation. I recall Scott Greer saying that the important thing about the space-time ratio of modern technology is that because you can get from Los Angeles to San Francisco faster than from downtown L.A. to its airport, then Los Angeles and San Francisco are so close and the Nation is just a short shuttle. For me the significance instead is that it is harder to get to the airport from downtown L.A., than from L.A. to S.F.. This means that while the nation may be getting smaller, the city is becoming immense beyond familiar conception. Its enormity far exceeds the distance between cities.

What can we make and must we make of the enormity of urban society? A rich polity of ample authority and democratic rule. For the sake of that taste of democracy, how do we fulfill the city's authority and the people's rule? What kind of government must it have? Should there be one government in the city or many? Can the neighborhoods govern and the city be a common body

of ward republics? Johnson of Connecticut at the Constitutional said that what everyone was really arguing about was whether the state is a district of people composing one political society, or as composing many political societies? He was talking about the states. We can ask the same question of the city and rediscover all the meaning that comes with finding new facts about many polities.

I'll stop with that question, which is a good place to start. There is a final note I wish to add. If we agree that the city is our existential polity, albeit today politically incited and functionally unformed, then it must become more consciously credited as the real pragmatic forum of our social judgment and political knowledge. So long as what parades as our competent political knowledge about our nation and the world has no conscious reference to the city as our existential polity, then our opinion will continue to be divorced from practical political foundations in knowledge and experience of our lives. If we do not honor and politically fulfill the terrain of our daily life, we cannot build practical political "judgment" for the common interest from real experience. Our national opinions and intents will then stand as abstractions and attitudes. How badly might we then render a nation. How unwise we could be? How dangerous our mis-adventure if we continue to govern ourselves and the world by idealizations and abstractions and attitudes. How badly might we then render a nation. How unwise we could be? How dangerous our misadventure if we continue to govern ourselves and the world by idealizations and abstractions, instead of practical social judgment. How will the misconduct of national idealism spoil our future, as the more exciting possibilities of democratic urban polity, through informed opinion and common judgment instead dim into the background?

The city is the basic unit of our political system. It is the place where we live and where we must live together. For the dignity of our political life, the city must be the center of our political life. It is the place where we must live together and where we must live together.

In return for the services which the city provides, the citizen must give back to the city. He must give back to the city in the form of taxes, in the form of service, and in the form of participation in the life of the city. He must give back to the city in the form of service, in the form of participation in the life of the city, and in the form of taxes.

This fundamental principle of exchange in the political system is an important basis of justice and balance in the society. It is the basis of justice and balance in the society. It is the basis of justice and balance in the society. It is the basis of justice and balance in the society.