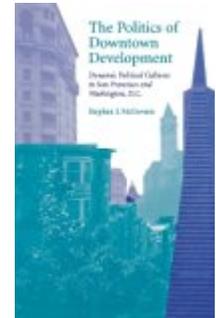


Stephen J. McGovern. *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. xiv + 342 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2052-2.



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Stephen McGovern's *The Politics of Downtown Development* is an insightful examination of the relationship between political culture and urban development. By analyzing how urban political cultures respond to development proposals, McGovern suggests that community activists who successfully bridge class and cultural differences can alter a city's political culture. In doing so, McGovern demonstrates how community groups, through collective action, can reshape downtown development by redefining the political context in which development decisions are made. McGovern's story is not just a story of elected officials and business leaders using their power to create new urban spaces, but instead is a clear-sighted discussion of how community action molds public political debate. This marks an important step in furthering our understanding of how community politics shape urban development.

Educated at Cornell University, (now a professor at Salem State College) McGovern is a political scientist by training. His study, however, moves away from "Cornell's traditional focus on the institutions of government," and instead, focuses on

the link between culture and politics and how shifts in cultural values can alter the context for political decisions. (p. xii) "The principal goal of this book," he posits, "is to elucidate how the local political culture matters in shaping the politics of downtown development." (p. 15) For McGovern, the battle over downtown development is not just a political one, where neighborhood organizations directly challenge business development. What takes place in the pages of *The Politics of Downtown Development* is an examination of how community activism transforms the political context of the corporate development debate which, in some cases, produces more favorable results to the community at-large. McGovern frames his analysis around a different set of questions. His questions are based on how shifts in culture and values transform the politics, and challenge the vast majority of studies exploring similar issues.

Many studies of neighborhoods actively involved in urban development position one side (citizen groups and activists) against another (government and development). McGovern suggests

that "the 'local cultural settings' that characterize most American cities mold popular perceptions of self-interest and the public interest regarding downtown development such that only a narrow range of public policies are seen as legitimate, and this has important ramifications for political activities." (p.15) By emphasizing the notion of political culture, McGovern develops a new framework, which challenges the good versus evil dichotomy, and explores political decision in the context of cultural change. He writes, "that people who engage in various forms of political activity inevitably have an impact on the ideas, values, beliefs, and practices that constitute the local political culture and that those cultural impacts then have important ramifications for the content of public policy." (p. xi)

In order to develop this line of reasoning, McGovern "builds on [Antonio] Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and counterhegemony in positing a more dynamic explanation of political change, one that takes account of both material and postmaterial concerns." (p. 58) The politics of hegemony and/or counterhegemonic activism within urban spaces is a fundamental indicator for understanding how power operates and the cityscape is reshaped. Political decisions are made within a political culture that is always in flux, despite the potential for stability of city officials. Likewise, political culture does not always change when new officials are elected into office. What McGovern expresses in his book is that political leaders are just part of a larger political infrastructure based on community activism and neighborhood associations. While that might not seem like a bold step, I think the way he uses this notion of political culture to examine shifts within a city's value structure is an important step forward.

The Politics of Downtown Development is divided into four sections, an introduction, sections on San Francisco and Washington, D.C., and a conclusion. In the introduction, McGovern discusses

the book's methodology, which is built upon an impressive body of literature and based on an informative discussion on Gramsci's theory of hegemony. McGovern's thesis concerning how political culture shifts and affects downtown development is also presented in this section. He argues that in order "to overcome the cultural hegemony of downtown elites, a grassroots movement must satisfy two conditions. First, there must be a coherent oppositional vision of politics - one that both resonates with the actual experiences of disgruntled groups and subverts the hegemonic world view that legitimizes the status quo. Second, there must be a congruence between that vision and the discourse and conduct of the challenging movement." (p. 39)

In the next two sections of the book, McGovern explores how either counterhegemonic activists overcame the cultural hegemony of downtown elites, by changing the urban political culture, or attempts to challenge the political clout of downtown elites failed to gain wide spread support among local citizens.

McGovern tests his theory against urban development in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco during the 1970s and 1980s. These cities, McGovern argues, "were both hotbeds of neighborhood activism...[and] had cause to feel aggrieved because of downtown growth." (p. 42). In San Francisco, high rise development and increased gentrification of low income neighborhoods created the conditions for neighborhood activism. Whereas, in Washington, D.C., the proposal for new office buildings to be located in the heart of the city caused local citizens to voice their opposition. The main function of *The Politics of Downtown Development* is to explore why these two cities, facing the same type of corporate development, had two widely disparate political experiences.

The section on San Francisco fits neatly into McGovern's counterhegemonic model and supports his position that changes within the local political culture affect changes within the political

institutions. San Francisco demonstrated that "the central features of this alternative political culture would be a vigorous and expansive public sphere characterized by widespread popular engagement in the political process." (p. 11) Conversely, Washington's failure to alter the course of downtown development was due, in large part, to community groups' inability to bridge differences and create a unified counterhegemonic political organization.

Despite the advances made by McGovern's analysis, there are a number of shortcomings in his thesis. Primarily, McGovern sets Washington D.C. and San Francisco in such contrast that the narrative tends to overplay the differences. Urban politics is never as clear-cut as McGovern posits. I think a more serious discussion of opposing voices within the counterhegemonic groups, especially in the San Francisco case study, would have enriched the analysis of political culture.

Furthermore, McGovern does not fully explore the issue of race. His explanation of San Francisco urban politics argues that counterhegemonic groups looked beyond race in order to form united opposition. This, in McGovern's opinion, was one of the many positive outcomes of counterhegemonic organizing. Conversely, race was one of many conditions that separated opposition groups in Washington, D.C., and was a contributing factor in limiting the political impact of neighborhood groups. Yet, McGovern does not fully address why race in one situation did not matter and why it did in another. I think that McGovern should have delved deeper into the question of race, especially since many of the people he interviewed in Washington, D.C. used highly racialized language to describe the city's political culture, suggesting that racial differences created political barriers. Oftentimes, McGovern misses the mark because he suggests race was not a component that defined an urban political culture. In the Washington, D.C. example, he argues that the reason counterhegemonic groups could not find com-

monality was based more on economic and cultural factors than on racial differences. While I disagree with this explanation, McGovern does, in fact, examine race as a possible cause, but just does not argue for its relevance.

The Politics of Urban Development is a well-written and extremely informative book. Additional maps detailing the specific spaces under discussion would have enhanced this reader's understanding of the urban landscape, but their absence was not vitally important. What is important, and most valuable to this reader, is the model McGovern sets forth. The use of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and how it relates to and shapes urban political culture provides an engaging perspective on urban politics. By moving away from centers of urban power (i.e., big business and political institutions), McGovern provides a challenging assessment of how cities are shaped and who has the power to shape them. The story that is often told is one of political leaders embracing the urban vision of developers. McGovern suggests that power rests within the political culture of a city, which embodies the collective vision of all those involved. It is for this reason that I would recommend this book for any one interested in urban political and development issues.

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