

City-Regions and Social Reproduction: A 'Place' for Sustainable Development?

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Abstract

Recent studies have suggested a city-region's competitiveness is based not only on production, but social reproduction. These issues as well as the policy measures adopted by many city-regions are frequently couched in a discourse of 'sustainable development'. But as an analytical framework how well does the concept of sustainable development account for the dynamics of social reproduction and the sustainability of a city-region? This article examines the possible relationship between city-regions and sustainable development at a conceptual level. We argue that despite some excellent work on the concept of 'just sustainability', current constructions of sustainable development are inadequate to capture the broad array of social and economic issues found in the city-region. As a way forward we initiate a discussion between the sustainability literature and labor geography, and provide a case study of a hospital privatization process in Boston, USA, which has been framed by a politics of city-regionalism.

Introduction: city-regions, social reproduction and 'sustainable development'

In western countries 'post-Fordist' capitalism continues to reconstitute itself in the context of neoliberal policy reforms (Macleod, 2001; Brenner, 2002). Particular expectations surround growth in 'new economy' industries and the transformation of governance and citizenship associated with their development. Indeed, recent writings suggest that in the new economy city-regions will eclipse nation-states as the primary scale for promoting and sustaining economic competitiveness (Scott, 2001). What is perhaps most surprising about these emerging developments is that a region's *competitiveness* may *not* be necessarily tied to its productive capacity; rather a region's ability to ensure *social reproduction* is becoming an increasingly important factor in its continued 'success' (White *et al.*, 2004; Ward and Jonas, 2004). In this context, 'social reproduction' refers to strategies for conserving open-space, reducing commute times, delivering public transport, providing affordable housing, improving access to services (such as healthcare), and creating and preserving good wage-earning jobs for those not holding one of the city-region's 'signature' jobs. In other words, to function competitively, both in terms of production and quality of life, so-called 'city-region states' must marshal the resources to support a wide variety of needs and interests. Indeed, we agree with Jonas and Ward's claim (2004: 1) that '[c]ity-regionalism is related in some ways to the problems of managing new geographies of uneven development, and where difficult ideas of "quality of life", "sustainability" or more generally the liveability of city-regions for all classes and interests (*not just elites*) come into play' (emphasis ours).

By referring to a discourse of 'sustainable development' elites are often seeking to manage tensions around competitiveness and social reproduction (Gibbs and Krueger,

2007). To date, however, work on sustainable development has mainly been about *environmental* conservation (Dobson, 2003). Moreover, sustainable development policy, as it actually exists, often amounts to little more than a spatial development strategy geared toward middle-class environmentalists or the aesthetic of some emergent 'creative class' (cf. Krueger, forthcoming). While concepts of environmental and social justice do enter into some of these discussions, they usually do so at the organizational level among subaltern groups (Pulido, 1996; Keil and Desfor, 2004; Agyeman, 2005). In terms of policy, however, sustainable development remains ultimately about environmental improvements and challenges, not issues of social justice *per se*.

In an effort to put sustainability on a more progressive course we will argue for an engagement between the sustainable development literature and the concept of social reproduction. What seems to be lacking in the current sustainable development discourse is an understanding of the real politics and struggle of economic development in and across the city-region, both in terms of the economic forces acting upon them and the people engaged in struggles to shape such forces in different ways. In order to emphasize this point, our analysis begins not with an examination of environmental problems or archetype organizations and activities; rather, our entry point is the concept of social reproduction itself: how people 'make a living' in the city-region, their efforts to sustain families and communities, and how these things impact environmental sustainability. To unpack some of these issues we employ a literature very familiar with economic cycles and politics: labor geography. Why labor geography? Following Marx, and a league of scholars who have reinterpreted his writing in the context of the environment and justice, we believe that engaging the metabolism for how people create their conditions of existence has implications for a more *just* notion of sustainability, not one that reproduces middle-class ideals or is focused solely on the environment (Harvey, 1996; Castree, 2000; Swyngedouw and Heynan, 2003). In providing this brief intellectual show-and-tell between labor geography (social reproduction) and urban sustainable development we hope to bring about a nuanced sustainable development 'theory' that is action oriented and that retains a conceptual and political edge now largely absent from the literature.¹

In the remainder of this article we will discuss some of the conceptual issues and practical politics of sustainable development in city-regions. Conceptually, we focus on the lack of attention in conceptual approaches to urban sustainability to concepts of economic development. We take up the argument first put forth most clearly in the work of Agyeman *et al.* (2003) who suggest that discourses and theories of sustainability are too focused on the environment. Implicit in this argument is that Agyeman *et al.*'s work would benefit from the concept of social reproduction in that it captures the real economic development politics of what they call 'just' sustainability. To illustrate our point we weave into our discussion a case study from the Boston city-region in Massachusetts, USA, which considers the role of community unionism and economic restructuring in shaping city-regionalism debates and practices. Here we explore the labor politics of sustainability and build a bridge between a movement that knows all too well the cycles of economic change, and a movement that is often bourgeois, even idealistic in its political strategy.

Rethinking sustainable development

The literature on sustainable development has long purported to focus on the tripartite relationship between economy, environment and social justice (O'Riordan, 1999). Despite this somewhat tiring refrain (and accompanying political back-slapping), sustainable development as a development discourse and incipient set of policies has yet to live up to its progressive potential: to bring together these issues in a holistic way

1 Thanks to the editors of this debate section for helping us to clarify this argument.

(Gibbs and Krueger, 2007; Krueger and Agyeman, 2005; Agyeman, 2005). It is an alluring concept to be sure, yet sustainability remains problematic both analytically and practically. Most work on sustainability is linked to natural or resource limits and an environmental interpretation of sustainability (Dobson, 2003). How do we protect nature and resources? Where can we restore nature? How do we live within nature's limits? Yet in our own research, we have found that sustainable development has an important social and economic context. In city-regions, environmental strategies unevenly affect the so-called 'creative class'. But sustainable development analyses generally fail to consider the power relations inherent in who decides which limits to consider and where the boundaries are drawn for so-called sustainable outcomes (Krueger, 2005). Further absent from such discussions are questions of social equity and the 'economic' domain of sustainability. Indeed, most case studies focus on 'environmental' problems from the start without any critical reflection on how that entry point might influence the framing of sustainability.

In practice, sustainability policy is equally puerile. Much policy remains wedded to the environmental domain and ignores the social and economic dimensions. In the US, it has become synonymous with the environmental policy of the 1970s (*cf.* Portney, 2003). Yet if sustainable development comprises a framework for managing the material contradictions of social reproduction in city-regions, why is the three-legged stool so uncomfortable? Why does it not address other crucial aspects of social reproduction?

The concept of 'just sustainability' was coined by Agyeman *et al.* (2003) as an explicit attempt to link issues of social equity to economic and environmental sustainability policy and practice. Arguably, it presents the state of the art in critical sustainability theory. By bringing together the sustainability literature with the environmental justice literature, these authors sought to create a vocabulary for political opportunity and mobilization both in the grassroots and local government (Agyeman *et al.*, 2003; Agyeman and Evans, 2004; Agyeman, 2005). In 2005, Agyeman extended this work to develop what he calls the 'just sustainability paradigm' (or JSP). He has examined the evolution of a community environmental organization in Boston to demonstrate the linkages between environmental justice and sustainability. To date, this work has focused largely on the organization aspects, a vision of movement leaders rather than the 'extensive' politics of economic development. There thus remains a critical need to examine how sustainability might be 'mapped' onto the current geography of neoliberal capitalism and, more importantly, where the opportunities for broader political engagement with sustainability might present themselves. City-regions and social reproduction seem to present appropriate opportunities for this kind of exploration.

The politics of multidimensionality? Sustainability in the city-region

The politics of nature 'in' sustainability have been well documented (see Gibbs, 2002). This politics is also recognized in recent studies of city-regional growth politics. As Prytherch (2002: 773) points out in his study of Tucson, for example, 'marketers may construct nature as a "condition" for the production of growth, but sprawl devours the landscape upon which their sales pitch is premised'. Here, nature or the environment becomes a commodity that is part of the competitive advantage of a city. But how nature is created is 'part of an overall social construction of hegemony in the city-region' (Keil and Desfor, 2003: 28). Notions of sustainable development and smart growth have been invoked in the US in the name of better environments. Oftentimes, however, these 'better' environments are created of and for members of the 'creative class'. Moreover, as cities and city-regions develop and redevelop urban cores, lower paid support workers, and former residents of these communities, suffer. Sustainability policies (e.g.

protection of green belt, growth controls) here may price low-wage earners out of local housing markets leading to long-distance commuting, two-income households and negative impacts in terms of environmental pollution, and low quality of family and community life (Luke, 2003; Walker, 2003; Krueger 2005). While *et al.*'s (2004) work supports this point. In their study of Cambridge, UK, they found that the success of the new economy created conflicts around land use planning, housing and infrastructure. In particular, they suggest that aggressive growth policies coupled with out-of-date planning could lead to deleterious social and environmental consequences for surrounding communities in an urban region. Although the public debate has included land for traditional industrial estates, in new economy spaces hosting high-tech companies, labor supply and infrastructure, such as housing, are the most pressing issues (While *et al.*, 2004). In a similar case that examines Worcester, Massachusetts, a city that is included in the functional Boston city-region, Krueger (2005) found that so-called 'sustainable developments' were appropriated by local growth coalitions to create 'green' amenities for attracting the creative class and their disposable income to Worcester and from the City of Boston itself.

As Agyeman *et al.* would acknowledge, wider structural economic and political constraints on organizations are formidable. The power of the market, institutions, culture and discourse to commodify and transform nature, let alone organize human activity and development, is also a complex constraining factor. In contrast to conventional economics (and economic geography), where the environment has been ignored for far too long, sustainable development has perhaps focused too closely on 'environmental' factors. As a result, issues of economic development and social justice have been ignored until recently. What might a critical approach to urban sustainable development look like and how can it reconcile environment, economy and social justice? Before turning to that question we will explore the concept of social reproduction through a brief analysis of labor geography and our case study.

Social reproduction of labor: a conversation with sustainable development?

One way to expand the scope of sustainability theory and examine it in the context of the city-region is to look to labor geography. Labor geography has moved beyond merely making workers visible actors in the economic landscape to examine the multiple ways in which workers and their institutions also shape political, cultural and social landscapes (see, for example, Herod, 1998; 2001; Castree *et al.*, 2004). While still largely focused on the manufacturing sector and private capitalism, some recent work has examined the role of workers in the public sector and collective provision. Through multi-union coalitions, community unionism, and new models of organizing at and across various scales workers and their institutions have been engaged in urban politics to sustain their very livelihoods (Banks, 1991; Johnston, 1994; Berman, 1998; Johns, 1998; Savage, 1998; 2006; Tufts, 1998; 2004; Berman, 1998; Fine, 2000; Johns and Virayla, 2000; Wills, 2001; Gray, 2004). Moreover, recent work on such campaigns emphasizes the possibilities of action at the city-region scale and not a kind of localistic 'militant particularism' (Walsh, 2000; Castree *et al.*, 2004; Savage, 2004).

Researchers have begun to consider how local social movements in the city might contribute to wider scales of action around social and economic justice. Walsh's (2000) research on the living wage campaign in Baltimore not only demonstrates the effectiveness of locally scaled actions that build union–community coalitions, but also points to the importance of emphasizing the sustainability of communities based on the ability of workers to support themselves and their families and communities. Similarly, the Justice for Janitors campaign emphasizes the need for social justice in the workplace and community while utilizing strategies designed for a city-region (Savage, 1998;

2006). However, Sadler (2004) and Fine (2000) both argue that while coalition building is a powerful tool for workers, alliances between unions and community groups are notoriously difficult to sustain in the times and spaces between an urgent, uniting battle. We suggest that the sustainability agenda may offer an ongoing uniting battle in the spaces and times between crises. In order to examine the possibilities to mediate neoliberalism through local political action in city-regions, we now turn to our case study.

Boston, collective provision and sustainability

Boston has a long history of neighborhood organizing and grassroots activism, with local groups in recent years demonstrating a capacity to make connections between actions focused on the redevelopment of the downtown and region-wide economic development issues (Jonas, 1996; Horan and Jonas, 1998; Savage, 2004). Like most cities in developed countries, Boston exhibits the trend of a dramatic drop in manufacturing employment and an increase in service sector employment. These trends combined with an increase in the polarization of wages and an ever increasing cost of living — Boston now has the highest housing rents in the US — have led many to question how sustainable the city's growing economy is for those people that live and work in the city.

Boston is a well-known location for teaching hospitals and cutting-edge medical research: it is the home of such world-renowned institutions as the Harvard Medical School, the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and Brigham & Women's Hospital. Yet often unrecognized was that Boston had a 145-year history of the provision of healthcare at Boston City Hospital (BCH) — city residents were taken care of regardless of their ability to pay. Over 90% of BCH's patients were Boston city residents and 50% of their patients were uninsured. In contrast, other hospitals located in the city drew patients from a base of suburban patients who had health insurance (BMRB, 1996). The collective provision of healthcare, though limited in the US by the structure of the health care system, is a large part of many local and state budgets. Additionally, while the healthcare industry is critical to a city-region's economy in terms of costs, multiplier effects and urban image, it is an enormously significant part of the US employment, accounting for 10% of all workers. In Boston 23% of all workers are employed in the sector and Boston ranks first among US regions for its job concentration in healthcare.

In June 1994, Boston Mayor Tom Menino announced that he was establishing a special commission to design and implement a merger between the public BCH and the private University Hospital (UH) affiliated with Boston University (for a more detailed analysis of the merger, see Savage, 2004). Many felt that the city did not have the financial resources to compete with increased private activity and competition, decreased federal funding and budget pressures at the city level and argued that the merger was the only way out for the city.

The proposed merger, however, did not sit well with a variety of stakeholders for several reasons. Concerns about the continued collective provision of charity care, the specter of lay-offs, and the fact the tax dollars had paid for the physical plant of BCH were immediately raised. BCH workers were required to live in the city and the workforce was very diverse. What would be the impact of lay-offs as they would hit city women, racial and ethnic minorities, and immigrants? Who would provide healthcare to the poorest residents of the city? Finally, BCH had just moved into a new \$171 million hospital. Would the city just turn over new facilities to a private institution and in the process, give away significant community and taxpayer assets?

The notion of stopping the merger was quickly seen as unlikely so almost immediately a coalition of six unions that represented workers at BCH and UH was

formed to challenge the terms of the merger. Simultaneously, the labor unions reached out to community groups and worked to form the 'Coalition to Keep the PUBLIC in Health Care'. The coalition consisted of union members, community residents, and community groups, and statewide consumer groups such as Health Care for All.

The Coalition to Keep the PUBLIC in Health Care formed around the idea that concerns about the merger held by workers and community members were one and the same. They argued that you could not retain the public mission of the hospital without also protecting the livelihoods of the hospital workers. In a unique twist on the residency requirement that the city imposed on all municipal workers, activists argued that if the merger destroyed the quality of jobs, the city would, in turn, lose tax dollars and residents as people would be forced to move out of the city.

A sustainable institution: Boston Medical Center

In the end, after much public activism and late night negotiations, Boston Medical Center (BMC) was created as a result of the merger between BCH and UH. Though ultimately BMC became a private entity, the agreements won by labor and community coalitions were unprecedented. The City of Boston leases BCH facilities to BMC, which runs the new entity on city property, thus enabling unions and community groups to retain some leverage over the new institution. All workers retained seniority and sick time; vacations and pensions were preserved, and workers saw raises rather than pay cuts.

The patient bases of BCH (urban and uninsured) and UH (suburban and insured) were merged as well and many credit the mixed patient base with BMC's increased market volume since the merger, even as other Boston teaching hospitals have struggled to survive. Additionally, medical personnel from the former UH are now researching a whole host of new medical issues such as asthma and lead poisoning — cases they didn't see at UH but now see from the former BCH patients.

The Urban Institute reports:

the merged BMC has vigorously filled the safety net role, despite poverty advocates' concern going into the merger that BMC would become 'just another university hospital' (Bovbjerg *et al.*, 2000: 31).

Healthcare is tied to both production and reproduction. The provision of healthcare can provide decent wages work to workers of a variety of skills (production) as well as healthcare to people regardless of their ability to pay (reproduction). In the US, healthcare has historically provided jobs for minorities and women, and internal career ladders in hospitals. As the industry changes and management looks for ways to cut costs, it is these workers on the frontline who are experiencing lay-offs, de-skilling (using CNAs and LPNs rather than RNs²), and work speed-ups (i.e. increased patient loads). It is also these workers who are the residents of the city-region and contribute to the local political economy as workers and citizens.

The case study addresses the concept of 'just sustainability' and places it in its appropriate contextual period. That is to say, sustainability cannot be seen as a single normative account but one that is politically savvy, and seizes the opportunity not only to promote equity among generations but also realizes that moving toward sustainable development requires a painstaking process of social change; opportunities must be taken when they arise, regardless of their direct linkage to the 'environment'.

2 CNAs (certified nursing assistants) and LPNs (licensed practical nurses) have fewer years of training and lesser responsibilities than RNs (registered nurses) and, as a result, typically earn much less.

Sustainability with an 'edge?'

Cities and city-regions are adopting policies reminiscent of concepts found in the sustainable development literature. Indeed, research is even starting to show that contradictions faced by rapidly growing, new economy city-regions reflect the concerns articulated in the sustainable development discourse. But while cities can boast about green space preservation, restored waterfronts and even new low carbon mass transit, are these developments truly sustainable? Or do they sustain a regional development strategy based on 'computer geeks' and 'internet cafes'? Finally, does the sustainable development discourse have the analytical capacity to grapple with these questions and remain true to the approach's tripartite concerns of economy, social equity and the environment? In this article we have argued that the sustainable development discourse does have a progressive potential but if we are interested in grappling with issues of economy, social justice and environment the analytical entry point must extend beyond *environmental* sustainability to engage concepts of economic development and social justice. The work of Agyeman and colleagues takes a significant step toward this end by centralizing the concept of justice in sustainable development. Our amendment to this work calls for an understanding of justice in the context of urban and regional economic development. Linking social reproduction to this justice and the environment appeals to Marx's notion of metabolism (broadly construed) whereby humans through their labor remake the environment and themselves.

The BMC crystallizes these ideas in three ways. The case clearly engages the extant economic environment, both at the city-region scale as well as in terms of broader neoliberal reforms. The transformation of publicly owned entities to private ones is widely seen as a global strategy for states from Thailand to the UK and US. Converting public sector to private sector entities (and jobs), as the case study points out, changes our environment (e.g. access to healthcare and good paying jobs for women and minorities, longer commutes for those who find jobs in the city, uneven landscapes within the city-region). In the Boston city-region, for example, one has to travel 70 miles west of the city to find a community where the average cost of a home is under \$400,000. The case also engages the concept of justice in ways other exemplary cases of sustainable development do not. While there are implications for the environment in this case the entry point was about economic and social restructuring in the city-region and access to jobs. As people continue to be forced out of Boston, its environmental amenities will become more inaccessible to people outside the middle class (indeed they already are for many).

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Résumé

De récentes études ont suggéré que la compétitivité d'une région métropolitaine s'appuie non seulement sur la production mais aussi sur la reproduction sociale. Ces aspects, ainsi que les mesures politiques adoptées par de nombreuses régions métropolitaines, sont souvent formulés dans une rhétorique de 'développement durable'. Pourtant, on peut se demander si, en tant que cadre analytique, ce concept explique efficacement la dynamique de reproduction sociale et la 'durabilité' d'une région métropolitaine. L'article examine le lien potentiel, sur un plan conceptuel, entre régions métropolitaines et développement durable. Malgré d'excellents travaux sur le concept de 'durabilité juste', il apparaît que les interprétations actuelles du développement durable ne permettent pas de couvrir tout l'éventail des questions sociales et économiques que soulève une région métropolitaine. Comme ouverture, l'article propose une discussion entre les publications sur la durabilité et la géographie de la main-d'œuvre avec, en étude de cas, un processus de privatisation d'hôpital à Boston mené dans le cadre d'une politique de régionalisme métropolitain.