Harvey Molotch
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Key urban writings

Introduction
In urban studies, Harvey Molotch’s name is synonymous with the influential concept of the ‘growth machine.’ As elaborated in his 1976 American Journal of Sociology paper and his classic co-authored book with John Logan, Urban Fortunes (1987), the growth machine is a coalition of local business, political and allied elites who promote and benefit from economic development and population expansion in a city. Indeed, for Molotch (1976, 310), growth, in the American context, is the ‘very essence’ of most places. The influence of this thesis is indicated by its continued key role in critical studies of urban development, the debates it has provoked, and, not least, the fact that Urban Fortunes was republished in a twentieth anniversary edition in 2007.

Yet Molotch’s interests and influence range more widely than urban growth. They largely revolve around the nexus of power, persuasion and place. He has engaged and extended social constructivist approaches to key social issues by deploying largely qualitative methods, including discourse analysis, interviews, and ethnographic observation. He writes in an engaging, often witty style that draws insight from a broad range of theoretical literatures and empirical examples.

Molotch is Professor of Sociology, Metropolitan Studies, and Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University and was Chair and Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.
Academic biography and research focus

Molotch grew up in Baltimore, the son of a family of car and home appliance dealers. He studied philosophy as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, then received an M.A. and, in 1968, a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago. His doctoral dissertation was published as Managed Integration: Dilemmas of Doing Good in the City (1972). It is a study of the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago at a time of significant change in the racial composition of its resident population (research was conducted between 1965 and 1967). As white residents left the neighborhood and African-Americans became its majority population, South Shore was notable for organized local attempts to manage the changes and create a stable, racially integrated neighborhood. The strategy sought to make the neighborhood attractive to both white and black residents, thus promoting integration. For Molotch, this ultimately unsuccessful effort revealed that, pace the Chicago School of urban ecologists’ argument that people competed with each other for urban space, key interests in particular urban places also compete to attract residents and land uses to their locations. His first publication, submitted while still conducting his doctoral research, lays out this conceptualization of the city as a collection of land-based interests (Molotch, 1967). Thus, as we will see below, the seeds of the growth machine thesis are embedded in his earliest work.

While Molotch’s upbringing in post-war Baltimore and his time in Chicago brought him into close contact with the dynamics and tensions of urban change, his move to Santa Barbara in 1967 might have seemed to offer a more placid environment. California was certainly at the cutting edge of cultural change, but elite Santa Barbara, with its ‘ideal climate, gentle beauty and sophisticated culture’ (Molotch, 1970, 131), was perhaps less avant-garde than elsewhere in the state. Yet, any feeling of calm was soon shattered when, in January 1969, an oil platform blow-out spilled 80,000 – 100,000 barrels of crude onto Santa Barbara’s beaches. As Molotch (1970, 131) insightfully put it in an influential paper, ‘[m]ore than oil leaked from … [the platform] – a bit of truth about power in America spilled out along with it’ (1970, 131). He proceeded to unpack the power dynamics of the spill, noting that its impact on an elite enclave made a difference to the ensuing reaction. The response was also profoundly conditioned by national political and economic elites, who controlled the regulatory system, and by the media, who framed the issue in specific ways (see also Molotch and Lester, 1974). For him, the study of this local disaster provided insight into much wider questions of how places are shaped and represented by powerful interests, operating across a range of sites, and illuminated the limits of local elites’ abilities to influence decisions made at other scales (another theme that reemerges in his later discussion of the growth machine).

If Chicago and Santa Barbara are important waypoints in Molotch’s academic biography, his encounter with John Logan in 1976 was another profound marker. The pairing was an arranged marriage of sorts. Having published Molotch’s growth machine paper in the same 1976 issue as Logan’s study of suburban development, the editors of the American Journal of Sociology asked each to comment on the other’s work. The ensuing debate contained elements of a deepened and expanded growth machine concept and led, eleven years later, to their co-authored Urban Fortunes.

Key ideas

While much of Molotch’s work has analyzed the nexus of power, persuasion, and place, this focus is particularly apparent in the growth machine thesis. A growth machine is a loose coalition of local business political, and allied elites whose interests converge around their dependence on drawing income, profit and, in some cases, political power from their control and development of local land. Thus, for Logan and Molotch, they are ‘place entrepreneurs’, intent on creating the preconditions
for growth and attracting investment to their locality. Core members of the growth machine include developers, construction companies, property financiers and the real estate industry. All are tied to their place. Small landlords, for instance, have limited means to buy and rent out more land in other cities, while local developers benefit greatly from the strong ties they have nurtured in their local land market but have little ability to become similarly embedded elsewhere. Therefore, their interests lie in promoting growth locally as they hope this will push up demand for land, land prices and rents.

Logan and Molotch argue that local politicians, media companies, power utilities, arts and entertainment organizations, sports teams, organized labor, and universities, among others, are also fundamentally interested in increasing the size of their local markets because their ability to gain revenue elsewhere is limited. Central to this confluence of interests between local economic and political elites—epitomizing what Urban Fortunes calls the ‘political economy of place’—is the growth machine’s tension-filled relationship with non-elite urban residents. Logan and Molotch argue that the majority of urban residents’ interests are not primarily tied to maximizing profit from land. Yet they are profoundly affected by development decisions. Thus, a key focus of growth machine activities is to persuade the majority of the local population that growth is not only good for local elites’ interests, but that growth is good for all, even in the face of evidence and political activism that argues otherwise. This struggle makes cities what they are.

Molotch’s (1976, 313) original argument invoked notions of elites, ideology, the redistribution of resources, and locality to make the intentionally provocative, ‘extreme statement’ that efforts to affect the distribution of growth are ‘the essence of local government as a dynamic political force.’ By 1987, an expanded conceptual framework underpinned Urban Fortunes. Key concepts included: place and its social production as a rubric under which to emphasize the role of conflict among groups of activists in shaping cities; use and exchange values as a framework to organize analysis of the interests frequently squaring off in growth-related conflicts; capital and rentiers to differentiate corporate, less place-dependent economic interests on the one hand, and place-dependent interests that draw income from various forms of rent on the other; serendipitous and active entrepreneurs and structural speculators as three different types of place entrepreneurs, where structural speculators are the most involved in influencing public policy-making for their own ends; the myth of ‘value free’ development as a way to highlight the ideological arguments made by pro-growth advocates about the universal benefits of development; and systemic power, indicating the deep intertwining of political and business elites’ interests in contemporary cities. Through a rich set of American examples, Logan and Molotch (1987, 98) argue that, in most cases, local growth is “a transfer of wealth and life chances from the general public to the rentier groups and their associates … [To] question the wisdom of growth for any specific locality is to threaten a benefit transfer and the interests of those who gain from it.” Yet, the later chapters of the book, inspired in part by Molotch’s experience in Santa Barbara, search out signs—particularly in the environmental movement—of effective strategies for engaging in just such a critical stance.

In the last fifteen years, Molotch has continued to develop important ideas for the analysis of power, persuasion and place. These have intersected with a growing focus in urban studies on materialities (e.g., Rantisi and Leslie, 2010). His ideas address two related themes. First, he has developed a sociological and geographical study of the design and provenance of the mundane things that are ‘lashed up,’ or assembled with our daily lives (Molotch, 2005, 2). In this work, represented by his book, Where Stuff Comes From (2005), and influenced by Latour’s (1987) Actor Network Theory, he argues that objects, from cars and home appliances (Baltimore again . . .), to furniture, medical appliances, engines, buildings, and toilets (a longstanding interest of his: Molotch, 1988; Molotch
and Norén, 2010), reveal much about how contemporary society operates and is experienced. For Molotch (2005, 20), drawing on his ethnographic research on the largely urban-based design professionals who craft much of the material world, a “[b]etter understanding of the stuff system, including its ‘deep’ mechanisms of change and stability, can [help] … improve goods – both socially and ecologically – and comprehend more about the society that produces them.”

Most recently, in the wake of September 11th 2001 – a day on which he watched the Twin Towers collapse from his New York apartment – Molotch has developed a second set of ideas, concerning disasters (Santa Barbara again …), fears, anxieties, threats, and the securitization of cities. In Against Security (2012), he argues that the new urban security ‘normal’ also involves the lashing up of objects and infrastructures with daily life. He documents the way urban infrastructures like subway systems, airports, streetscapes and skylines are being designed, governed, and built in the thrall of ‘security.’

Certainly, these sorts of assemblages reveal a lot about the society that is producing them and these hegemonic socio-material and socio-spatial systems of power are thoroughly urbanized, both in terms of where they are designed and where they are consumed, implemented and experienced. Again, Molotch’s analyses are timely, emerging at a juncture when urban residents and scholars are grappling with the increasingly evident militarization of cities (e.g., Graham, 2012).

**Contributions to urban studies**

Molotch, then, has a history of making opportune, insightful contributions to urban scholarship. His most established contribution is the growth machine concept, which emerged at an useful time. The 1970s and 1980s were an era of great ferment in urban studies. The ecological, liberal, neoclassical, and positivist perspectives of the Chicago School and its successors were being challenged by alternative perspectives inspired by Marxian, Weberian, and emergent postmodernist approaches. In various ways, these new critical and radical perspectives were concerned with the location and operation of power and with both explaining and changing inequalities in contemporary society. An elite theory of power that critiques mainstream pluralist understandings of urban politics, growth machine theory brought a number of helpful concepts to the center of debate.

Molotch’s work with Logan undoubtedly continues to have great influence on how urban studies scholars conceptualize urban politics (e.g., Jonas and Wilson, 1999; Bedore, 2014). Yet, it has also been a topic of criticism and debate over the years. Reviewers at the time of its publication critiqued what they saw as *Urban Fortunes*’ tendency to give too much conceptual weight to individual activities, even as parts of coalitions, instead of the historical structural forces that position people in opposition to each other or in particular relationships to capital and the land. Place, for many, especially geographers, appeared undertheorized in the book, as did scale, while questions were raised about the international applicability of a theory developed entirely in the US context. The growth machine category itself was critiqued as encompassing too many disparate actors and many felt it failed to adequately conceptualize the power of the state. Moreover, the reliance on dualisms in the theory of growth machines (use/exchange value, local rentiers/capitalists) was questioned.

These questions emphasize the growth machine’s worth as a concept: it has focused attention on how best to analyze important structures and inequalities in cities and, even through disagreements, has helped strengthen contemporary critical urban studies as a result. Logan and Molotch have responded to many of the critiques and Molotch especially has addressed questions of international applicability, for example, through research on other contexts and by continuing to defend an agency-centered approach to the study of urban development (Molotch, 1993). Of course, cities and
their political economies continue to change. Concerns over the environment, while even more politically potent (Warner and Molotch, 2000), have also increasingly been incorporated into development regimes via terms like ‘sustainable development,’ while once locally-bound real estate interests and institutions, like universities and sports teams, have found ways, in a deregulated world, to ‘jump scale’ and tap sources of income beyond their original locality. These and other changes bear ongoing investigation and they encourage continued critical engagement with the growth machine thesis.

Yet Molotch’s contributions to urban studies extend beyond the growth machine thesis. His recent work on consumer products, infrastructures, and the lived realities of urban security intersect productively with scholarship on materialities, actor networks, and security/militarization. As he has done in his previous work, Molotch resists and critically unpacks hegemonic notions of how cities work. Then, through engaging narratives, he presents alternative visions of how they might work, and be lived, better. These insights suggest that his influence will continue to inflect urban scholarship for years to come.

**Secondary sources and references**


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