
Professor Benjamin Waddell
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Portland's Urban Political Economy

Urban theory is divided into three major influences of power, the Pluralist Model, the Power elite, and the Marxist political economic model. The Pluralist Model takes a structural functional approach in that it distributes the power widely throughout society because all members of a community are said to have a role. In C. Wright Mills' Power Elite Model the idea is that the upper class controls a large portion of society's wealth, power, and prestige. Mill's theory claims that the power elite, a group comprised of the super-rich of society, control three major sectors of society: the government, the military, and the economy. In the power elite model, the super-rich are so powerful that they do not have any real competition within society so the planning of a city is biased to serve the needs of the mega rich. The third model is Karl Marx's Political Economy. The theory is similar to that of the power elite in that there is still a separation of power that favors the super-rich, but in the political economy model it is the institutions themselves that are biased. In Marx's theory the power elites only exist because of a capitalist society. The problem is not the decisions that the power elites make but rather the problem is within the system itself. The main concept behind the theory is that "Capitalism transforms the city into real estate traded for profit which benefits the few (Macdonis)."

In the article, "The Rise and Fall of Mass Transit," the authors speculate that urban planning in America has been largely influenced by wealthy corporations that have much to gain. The auto, oil, and rubber instrumental complexes were involved in a conspiracy to replace

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efficient electric mass transit trolley system in place in Los Angeles up until the 1920s with a less efficient motorbus system. The idea behind this was that there were more profits to be made by the powerful corporations in having an inefficient system.

"A news analyst by the name of Harry Reasoner stated, [It] was largely the result of a criminal conspiracy. The way it worked was that General Motors, Firestone, and Standard Oil of California and some other companies, depending on the location of the target, would arrange financing for an outfit called National City Lines, which coozied up to city councils and county commissioners and bought up transit systems like L.A.'s. Then they would junk or sell the electric cars and pry up the rails for scrap and beautiful, modern busses would be substituted, busses made by General Motors and running on Firestone Tires and burning Standard's gas (Feagin, 2009)"

When we compare Portland to Los Angeles, we see more elements of a pluralist application of power being applied as the decision process includes the input from members throughout Portland's society. Instead of effective public transit being replaced with highways we see the exact opposite. In 1975, Mayor Neil Goldschmidt halted development for the Mt. Hood Freeway due to the petitioning of blue collar workers of South-East Portland, who would have had their neighborhoods demolished to accommodate the traffic of future suburbs. Instead the land was developed into Tom McCall Waterfront Park, a large green park that stretches along the Willamette River. Three years later the Portland Transit Mall opened. The Mall became synonymous with downtown redevelopment with its introduction in 1978. Using money that was originally intended to build the Mt. Hood Freeway, the Metropolitan Area Express Light Rail line, abbreviated MAX, opened for use in 1986, connecting downtown Portland with Gresham. The MAX line became one of the first modern light rail systems in the

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nation. This construction of a light-rail system has proven to be a success story for the positive growth of a city. "TriMet's transportation and environmental leadership has helped spur \$8 billion in transit-oriented development along MAX Light Rail lines. Much of this development mixes residential with retail and other commercial use, creating communities where people can live, work and play. This approach helps enrich the human environment and reduce sprawl, traffic congestion and associated air pollution." (TriMet: MAX Light Rail Service)

Portland's widely effective transportation program uses light-rail trains to alleviate traffic congestion. As a result, Portland experiences commute times that are 20% shorter compared to other U.S. cities of comparable size. The average commuter saves approximately five hours of transit time each year, which may seem inconsequential until we consider that this saves the region \$98 million annually in time and fuel. The light-rail also reduces highway congestion - the MAX Light Rail line carries 26% of evening rush-hour commuters traveling from downtown along the Sunset and Banfield freeways. On the Sunset Highway alone the adjacent line handles enough passengers for the equivalent of nearly two and a half lanes of additional traffic on the Sunset Highway, reducing the city's dependency on the oil, auto, and rubber industries. Portland shows that there is alternative to the cities that are shaped by an urban political economic policy.

Portland defies Marx's theory by showing that a city that operates within a capitalistic economy can provide services that benefit the whole of society instead of only benefiting the power elite. This

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illustrates that no matter what society's economic system is, communist or capitalist, it does not necessarily determine whether a more pluralist application of power in civic design.

Works Cited

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