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“The Glorified Municipality”: State formation and the urban process in North America

Katherine M. Johnson*

University of Northern Colorado, Geography, 2241 Candelaria Hall, Greeley, CO 80639-0062, USA

Abstract

This article revisits the debate over whether and to what extent the cities of the United States and Canada can be understood as a common ‘North American city’ by reconsidering the role of the their common federal system of government. Drawing on a Marxist theory of the capitalist state and the municipal histories of New York State and the Province of Ontario, the article traces the institutions and patterns of urbanization in the two countries to a dialectic of political conflict between the sub-national states and the industrializing cities, conditioned by federal divisions of sovereignty and grounded in the expanding social property relations of capital. The final section connects this dialectic to historically new conditions for the expanded reproduction of capital, specifically in the constitution of land as a commodity form. It also speculates briefly on the implications of this analysis for a more spatially informed theory of the capitalist state.

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Keywords: State theory; Historical materialism; Land-use; Urbanization; Federalism; North American city

A longstanding debate in urban theory asks whether and to what extent the cities of the United States and Canada can be classified as a single type, a common “North American city” (Garber & Imbroscio, 1996; Goldberg & Mercer, 1986; Harris, 2001). Initial similarities in physical appearance and political style suggested the influence of a common material endowment, shaped by a common economic system and a similar timing of settlement and industrialization (Yeates & Garner, 1971). In the mid-20th century, however, U.S. cities suffered an

* Tel.: +970 351 2160; fax: +970 351 2890.

E-mail address: katherine.johnson@unco.edu

extended period of economic and social decline as compared with their Canadian counterparts, suggesting a greater willingness and capacity in Canada to shape economic forces to social ends (Keating, 1991). More recently, however, many Canadian cities have begun to follow the American lead into a pattern of urban decline and suburban sprawl (Filion, Bunting, & Gertler, 2000).

A common explanation for this “convergence” in urban process and form (Harris, 2001) is new economic forces coincident with the globalization of economic activity (Keil, 2000; Mercer & England, 2000). Another argument, however, locates the change well before the current period in the way that Canadian provinces responded to new rounds of urban growth. As one study explains, the provinces gradually “lost interest” in the urban core in favor of the urbanizing fringe (Friskien & Norris, 2001: 474). What is interesting about this second argument is that it points to another continental condition largely missing from the debate over the North American city: the United States and Canada share not just the same material endowment and economic system but a distinctive political system; one, in particular, that confers direct sovereignty over the cities to a sub-national level of government. To the extent that this common federal form has been raised in the debate, however, the emphasis has been on *differences* at the sub-national level. It was the Canadian provinces that created the institutions credited with saving Canadian cities from urban decline (Lemon, 1996). The American states, by contrast, ceded broad powers to local government 100 years ago under the rubric of “home rule,” significantly complicating the process of urban reform (Weir, 2005). What this second argument suggests, in short, is that the reason Canadian cities are becoming more like American cities is that Canadian provinces are becoming more like American states.

This paper revisits the debate over the North American city by reconsidering the role of the federal constitution of the North American state. My conception of this political form draws on the theory of the capitalist state that emerged from debates in Marxism of the 1970s and 1980s (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2002; Jessop, 2002). To elaborate briefly, the capitalist state in this view is neither an instrument of the capitalist class nor a structurally determined function of capital of prior Marxist formulations, but a distinctive ensemble of institutions that emerged out of pre-existing state forms to constitute, enforce, and legitimize the social property relations of capital. These institutions include, at core, a legal system based on liberal principles of property rights understood as prior to the state; a financial system to ease the transformation of capital through its money and commodity forms; and a system of representative government able to transform the juridical equality of property in capital and labor power into a political equality of persons, hence, depoliticizing the inequality at the core of the capital relation (Hirsch, 1978; Poulantzas, 1980; Thomas, 1994).

By this definition of the state, only the central states of the United States and Canada are capitalist. The process of state formation in both countries was marked by a gradual and contested ceding of sub-national sovereignty over the circulation of capital and individual rights. More importantly for this inquiry, the states and provinces retained a preponderance of sovereignty over the regulation and disposition of property in *land*. What this suggests is that, at least initially, the sub-national states had more in common with the *pre-capitalist* states of Europe than the emerging capitalist states of which they were a part. It also suggests that the federations of North America recreated an old political fault line. Coincident with, and following directly from, this division of sovereignty, the sub-national states of North America retained jurisdiction over the political organization of the territory. All municipalities in the United States and Canada are “mere creatures” of their sub-national states, as Iowa Judge John Dillon famously put it in 1868 (*Clinton v. Cedar Rapids and Missouri River R. R.*, 24 Iowa 455, 475).

Though politically subordinate, however, many cities were governed, at least initially, by a powerful merchant bourgeoisie. In the United States, many also had city charters that endowed them with large municipal estates and rival powers of self-government. The cities of North America were also, notably, on the threshold of capitalist industrialization, which brought an even more disruptive social class onto the political scene: the urban proletariat.

In the following, I trace the diverging and converging institutions of urbanization in North America to a dialectic of political conflict between the industrializing cities and their sub-national states, conditioned by federal divisions of sovereignty and grounded in the rising social conflicts and crisis tendencies of capitalist industrialization. I start by situating the federations of North America in this theoretical framework, focusing on the limitations of the sub-national states vis-à-vis the expanding social property relations of capital and the rival powers and constituencies of the industrializing cities. The next part traces two key conflicts that arose across this political fault line: the mid-19th century showdown between New York City and New York State, which produced the highly flawed system of municipal law replicated across the continent; and the mid-20th century struggle between the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario, which produced the metropolitan framework of government widely credited with saving Canada's cities from urban decline. Both narratives also highlight the role played by extra-constitutional institutions in the respective federal systems in generalizing the outcomes to other sub-national states, including the party system in the United States and executive federalism in Canada. The final part considers the more recent convergence in urban process and form between the United States and Canada, connecting this dialectic of city–state conflict to historically new conditions for the expanded reproduction of capital in the conversion of agricultural land to urban use. I also speculate briefly on the implications of this analysis for a more spatially informed theory of the capitalist state.

North American federations

For the delegates to the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia in 1787, there were two overriding reasons for strengthening their federation: securing external defense and creating an internal common market. Important in themselves, these initiatives were necessary in combination to advance the Atlantic trade on which their personal fortunes relied (Elkins & McKittrick, 1993). What earned them the greatest renown, however, were the protections for private property and individual rights built directly into the Constitution — additions that led Karl Marx to conclude that the new federation was the first truly capitalist state (Marx, 1970 [1843]). (These conditions were imposed by the ratifying conventions of the states and are found in the 5th and later 14th Amendments.) What almost caused their revamped federation to fail, however, is the fact that it joined two fundamentally incompatible modes of production under the same political roof. Failure to address the problem of slavery can explain not only the remarkable instability of the first 70 years, which culminated in a bloody civil war, but also the rapid expansion of the federation in the trans-Appalachian West, which literally displaced the conflict between north and south through the addition of new states (Meinig, 1986). It also helps to explain the cumbersome institutions with which the new federation entered the industrial era, including a chaotic and decentralized financial system (Hammond, 1957) and the powerful extra-constitutional party system that emerged across the north–south divide (Skowronek, 1982).

For the leaders of British North America meeting in Charlottetown in 1864 to draft a new framework for self-government, the United States was a largely negative object lesson. The

perpetual standoff between the President and Congress was the best argument for a British-style parliamentary system. The political circus of the American party system was a good reason to limit the vote to the propertied class. For many delegates, the appalling carnage of the Civil War made federation a distinctly inferior choice. The debate over federation, however, was also informed by the failure of the Union Parliament of 1840 to govern Ontario and Quebec under the same political roof (McKenna, 1993). The result of these deliberations was a top-heavy federal system that assigned all the important powers of the day to the federal level — from finance, to railroads, to grain elevators, to business incorporation (Section 91) — leaving a short list of domestic powers to the provinces (Section 92), including private law, religious education, municipal organization, and the management of natural resources. Though criminal law (Section 91.27) and family law (Section 91.26) were federalized, property and civil rights (Section 92.13) remained with the provinces along with “all matters of a mere private or local nature” Provisions were made for eventual federalization here as well — with the exception of Quebec — but only if the provinces agreed — and they did not (Smith, 1993).

With the approval of the British North America Act by the British Parliament in 1867, there were now two federations in North America, each dividing the core institutions of a capitalist state in roughly the opposite configuration. In the United States, the formal rights of individuals were lodged in the federal constitution, while jurisdiction over financial institutions (e.g., banks, business incorporation) remained with the sub-national states. In Canada, financial institutions were lodged at the federal level, while individual rights remained matters of provincial law. Over the next 100 years as the two countries moved through the cauldron of capitalist industrialization, these initial federal divides began to dissolve. The United States caught up with Canada in the financial sphere with the creation of the Federal Reserve System in 1914. Canada finally caught up with the United States in the area of individual rights in 1982 with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, although many argue that an “implied bill of rights” was in effect substantially before this time via interpretations of the British North America Act that emphasized English law and precedents (Gall, 1983). Though the process by which this centralization of sovereignty occurred was highly complex and punctuated by many backward steps, it is this larger consistency that confirms the nature of this transformation: both federations became capitalist states. A notable exception to this centralization of sovereignty, however, was the regulation and disposition of property rights in *land*. This is most apparent in Canada, where jurisdiction over land was not only expressly delegated to the provinces but also expressly omitted from the 1982 Charter of Rights, effectively precluding recourse to federal courts for conflicts in this jurisdictional realm. Despite strong constitutional protections for property rights and a much weaker constitutional shield against federal incursion, the same jurisdictional bias can be seen in the United States. All of the original 13 colonies retained sovereignty over their land — as did Texas, which was its own republic before joining the Union in 1845 — and most of the land acquired by Congress since 1790 was sold or given away to individuals and corporations or directly alienated to the trans-Appalachian states (BLM, 2006). Federal management of the remaining public lands — some 950,000 square miles of mountains and deserts in the West, or about 25% of the original total — is continuously challenged by “sagebrush rebellions,” while federal attempts at land management outside this realm have suffered a history of defeat (Friesen, 1984; Sanders, 1999).

What this persistent division of sovereignty in the regulation and disposition of property rights in land suggests is that, liberal constitutions, notwithstanding, the federations of North America also recreated a type of state at the sub-national that had more in common with the pre-capitalist states of Europe than the emerging capitalist states of which they were a part.

This is most apparent in the antebellum south where political power remained in the grip of a planter elite who derived their wealth from coercive control of both the land and the people who worked it. A material basis in the ownership of land, however, also describes the new states and provinces of the trans-Appalachian west, where the widespread distribution of land in fee simple brought a very different landowning class into political power.¹ A common theme in the history of both the United States and Canada has been the ability of petty commodity-producing farmers and small-town businessmen to compensate for their economic disadvantages in the circuits of capital accumulation by securing favorable subsidies and other legislation. The division of sovereignty emerges here as the unusual combination of a vigorous “American Road” to capitalism and a distinctively anti-capitalist rhetoric of rural victimization and entitlement (Page & Walker, 1991).

What this persistent division of sovereignty also suggests is that the federations of North America recreated the conditions for a type of political conflict that figured prominently in the transition to capitalism: cities versus states (Marx & Engels, 1938 [1843]). Coincident with and following directly from their sovereignty over land, the states and provinces of North America had direct sovereignty over all political subdivisions thereof. Jurisdiction over municipal government was itemized in the short list of powers assigned to the provinces by the British North America Act (Section 92) and has been virtually uncontested in the United States (Syed, 1966). The most significant of these political subdivisions, however, were large cities controlled by a merchant bourgeoisie whose wealth was conditioned and supplemented by political control over the built form of the city: its docks, warehouses, markets, and utilities. The largest of these cities in the United States, moreover, had powerful city charters that endowed them with large municipal estates and rival powers of self-government. Though commonly viewed as a beneficiary of federal union, this urban bourgeoisie had to struggle for control of the city against populist majorities in state and provincial legislatures. It also faced a growing challenge from its own rapidly expanding working class, which in the United States had secured the right to vote.

The North American city

A notable exception to the rejection of U.S. models by Canada’s founding fathers was the American approach to municipal government. In contrast to the layers of ancient privilege that governed localities in England, the American states had created a simple hierarchy of municipal forms governed by general rules of incorporation and a growing body of municipal law to work out the kinks (Hartog, 1983). The American approach pervaded Canadian debates over local self-government in the 1830s and 1840s and was adopted by the Union Parliament for Western Canada in the Baldwin Act of 1849, which provided the basic model of municipal incorporation adopted by other provinces as the federation grew (Higgins, 1977; Magnusson, 1983). Though widely perceived as a liberalizing move, having overcome the resistance of a colonial elite with good historical reasons for wanting to limit local self-rule, the new system was also a specific application of a new philosophy of law known as “legal formalism”. The aim of this new approach to law was not improving government so much as shifting the sources

¹ An important exception to provincial sovereignty over land was initially made for the three Prairie Provinces carved out of the territory of the old Hudson’s Bay Company; the Canadian government initially had the same power as the United States Congress to control railroad development and encourage settlement in these provinces. Ottawa’s control ended in 1930 and was accompanied by compensation payments to the prairie administrations (Friesen, 1984).

and aims of political power — specifically from legislatures to courts and from substantive to procedural ends (Horwitz, 1977).

The specific inspiration behind the advent of “legal formalism” in the United States was the excesses of the state legislatures, whose endless stream of land grants, patronage jobs, and special charters (for, e.g., banks, canals, plank roads and business ventures) in the early 19th century were a major contributor to the country’s first big financial crisis, the Panic of 1837 (Gunn, 1988). The aftermath of the crash — which forced many states into bankruptcy — ushered in a period of political struggle that culminated in the wholesale rewriting of state constitutions with debt limits, term limits, limits on appointive powers, and general incorporation laws designed to eliminate the need for legislative action altogether. The specific extension of legal formalism to municipal law, however, involved the very specific case of New York City. For 40 years after Independence, New York City had managed to hold on to its original crown charter (Montgomerie Charter of 1731), even as other cities lost theirs, by carefully honing a partisan alliance with New York State.² This alliance, which put the two New Yorks at the center of the emerging Democratic Party in the antebellum north, was similar to the city–state accommodations of pre-capitalist Europe: New York State’s advocacy of limited federal power in Washington meant that the banks and businesses of New York City would rule the nation’s commerce by default; the city, in turn, provided the financial backing for the state’s great public works, which roped the trans-Appalachian frontier into its imperial realm. This alliance, however, also put the city at the center of the financial panic of 1837, exposing its charter — as it did the state constitution — to the reformers’ zeal.

According to Hendrick Hartog (1983), it was the relentless application of the new philosophy of legal formalism to the old charter of the City of New York that produced the body of municipal law imitated by other American states and the Canadian provinces. In the process, however, it also eviscerated the old crown charter, effectively reducing the city to the legal status of a small town. The pivotal event was a 1857 ruling by the Appellate Court of New York State that upheld a series of laws that summarily stripped the city of a wide range of functions and replaced them with state-controlled commissions and boards (*People v. Draper*, 15 N.Y. 532). Hartog (1983: 263) compares this event to the English *quo warranto* of the 1680s: “Where Charles II failed in his attempt to make the metropolis into the legal equivalent of the smallest rural community, the judges of the New York appellate courts succeeded. New York City had been compelled to return its charter and its franchises to the state.”

The larger significance of this antebellum crisis and re-constitutionalizing of American state government is that, at the cusp of industrialization, cities across the continent were saddled with a small-town system of government — a system which, in the guise of the new formalist philosophy of law, distilled the practices and prejudices of a still largely agrarian world (Rutherford, 1974). The legal reasoning of the presiding judge in the 1857 case was the direct inspiration for the more famous ruling by Iowa Judge John Dillon 10 years later asserting that cities were “mere creatures” of their states (*Clinton v. Cedar Rapids and Missouri River R. R.*, 24 Iowa

² The colonial period in New York was marked by continuous infighting between the city’s merchant bourgeoisie and the landed elites of the Hudson Valley. This conflict shifted to a national stage with the Constitution of 1789 where it took on the added dimension of the conflict between North and South. The unusual alliance that protected the city’s charter emerged in the election of 1800 when the emerging Democratic–Republican Party made a clean sweep of the city’s artisans and mechanics (Young, 1967). New York City’s main rival, Philadelphia, lost its crown charter to a populist legislature right off the bat in 1776, partially regained it in 1789 only to lose it again in the electoral sweep of 1800.

455, 475 [1868]). All the new economic problems, political tensions, and profit opportunities emerging from the social transformations of capitalist industrialization were now, formally, *ultra vires*; that is, they had to be either off-loaded to the courts or readdressed to the state legislature. The result was a relentless fragmentation of power and accountability that only worsened as the cities grew. By the late 19th century, all the big cities of North America — Canada's included — were characterized by widespread corruption and clientism (Kaplan, 1982).

Municipal reform

In the early 1890s, a new group of reformers shifted attention away from the corruption of the cities to the flaws of legal formalism and began calling for a thorough redesign of city government based on the functional unity and complexity of urban life (Fox, 1977). As with the problems they targeted, this movement was continent-wide, characterized by a broad exchange of ideas across the border (the Canadian League of Municipalities was organized in 1901 based on the original National Municipal League of 1894). Though best known for launching the City Beautiful movement and the city manager form of government, which sought to cure the problems of the city through better functional design, the new reformers also called for re-centering authority and accountability in the city itself. This part of the reform agenda, however, stopped at the border. By the 1920s, most American cities had won substantial autonomy from their state legislatures under the general rubric of “home rule,” including the right to frame and enforce their own charters, impose new taxes, and create and enforce new uses of land — free from legislative interference (Patton, 1940). Despite some agitation in Montreal, however, Canadian cities remained in the thrall of their adopted Dillon's Rule (Lighthall, 1914).

The absence of municipal home rule in Canada is commonly viewed as an expression of deep cultural differences with the United States that can be traced to the lack of a revolutionary tradition of self-government (Lipset, 1990). This argument misses the common condition against which the struggle for home rule was advanced: the fragmentation of municipal government under a formalist approach to municipal law. It also misses the formidable institution that shaped the actual outcome in the United States: the party system. In the late-19th century, the U.S. party system produced two distinct political machines out of the votes and spoils of the industrializing cities. The most famous were “urban machines,” whose electoral base in the working class allowed them to re-impose partisan unity on a fragmented city government (reformers watched with dismay as the urban machines regrouped in the wake of legislative reforms, positioning their henchmen on the new state-controlled commissions and boards) (Bridges, 1984; Merton, 1968). Less colorful, though equally corrupt, were the machines that formed in the state legislatures around the powers hived off from the cities. As Lord James Bryce (1888: 612–613) put it: “[though] it may be true that the first attempts to secure legislative intervention in the local affairs... were made by good citizens in the supposed interest of reform and good government...the transfer of the control of the municipal resources from the localities to the capitol had no other effect than cause a like transfer of the methods and arts of corruption.”³ In order to achieve any reform in this context, reformers in the United States had to, effectively, hold their nose and jump into the political fray; that is, they had to field

³ Though the pattern began in New York, it is perhaps best illustrated in Chicago, a city designed on a strictly legal formalist model which, nonetheless, gave way to an upstate–downstate rivalry of legendary proportions, eventually producing the country's longest-lived urban machine (Einhorn, 1991). The most noxious variation, however, was in Philadelphia, where the city and state party machines were both Republican (Beers, 1980).

candidates who could win against *both* party machines. And the only way to do this was to broaden their narrow reform agenda to appeal to the working class, the largest block of urban votes. The actual means by which home rule was achieved in American cities was a wave of short-lived reform parties that adopted the label “Fusion” to advertise their inter-class appeal, ran candidates on broad reform platforms centered on municipal home rule – and began to win (Finegold, 1995).

Missing in Canada, in short, was not a revolutionary tradition of self-government but an entrenched party system and the working class vote, which in the United States had effectively recreated the original city–state conflict in partisan form. Though a similar non-ideological party system was emerging in Canada, the simpler electoral process of parliamentary government combined with the lack of direct provincial representation at the federal level made it a much weaker institution than its American counterpart (English, 1977). And though the Canadian provinces were beginning to extend the right to vote, property qualifications remained high enough in the late-19th century to exclude most of the working class. They also persisted in Canadian cities long after they disappeared in provincial and federal elections (LeBlanc, 1997). Precisely this combination, however, also ensured that the effect of municipal home rule in the United States would go well beyond simply holding the meddling states at bay. Though the Fusion parties were short-lived, the new capacity and accountability of city government they achieved effectively forced the urban machines to clean up their act. And this, in turn, began to extend the substantive concerns of the urban working class up the party ladder. In the 1910s and 1920s, state legislatures in New York, Massachusetts and other urbanized states began to enact regulatory measures aimed at workplace safety, restrictions on child labor, and the first attempts at unemployment insurance (Buenker, 1973). In 1933, the reformed and re-centered urban machines delivered the vote that brought Franklin D. Roosevelt to power – and with him, the much larger reform agenda of the New Deal. With no similar institutional conditions capturing and projecting the working class vote in Canada, no similar urban concerns disturbed the federal peace; Canada began and ended the Great Depression with the same conservative leadership of Prime Minister Mackenzie King (Bothwell, Drummond, & English, 1987).

What Canadians got instead was a new era of provincial intervention in urban affairs. Capturing this difference right from the start was the public utility commission, another continent-wide reform designed to regulate the companies that provided municipal services like electricity and transit. Though both U.S. and Canadian public utility commissions consisted of panels of independent experts dedicated to the new principles of scientific management, the American version can also be understood as a *reaction* to municipal home rule, calls for which were frequently combined with calls for municipal takeover of utility companies (Keller, 1990). The Canadian version, by contrast, suffered no similar political taint and wound up facilitating the municipalization of utilities in many cases (Armstrong & Nelles, 1986). More broadly, the emphasis on depoliticizing the urban process – attempting to cure the problems of the city through better *design* – inexorably drew the provinces in, committing them to ever larger technical fixes when things went wrong. The pattern was most striking in Montreal, which was forced into bankruptcy in 1918 after a series of provincial reforms failed to resolve that city’s class and ethnic conflicts (Kaplan, 1982). The more successfully reformed City of Toronto managed to reign in corruption only to eliminate many of the signals and incentives that encouraged investment in the city’s growth (Magnusson, 1983). According to Richard Harris (1996), failure of that city to widen its streets or extend its transit and sewer lines literally displaced the costs of growth onto its suburbs in the 1910s and 1920s, producing a ring of under-served, overextended

working class suburbs on the city's fringe. As the Depression deepened, most of Toronto's suburbs defaulted on their debt, forcing the Province of Ontario, like Quebec before, into the role of municipal receiver (Buck, 1949).

This diverging legacy of the Progressive era had its most visible effect in the diverging response to the urban growth that began to spill across city lines after World War II. The primary conditions behind this growth were the same in both countries: the advent of social welfare and housing policies at the national level (Canada created a federal housing program in 1946 modeled on the U.S. Housing Act of 1934). The response of the American states, however, was notoriously piecemeal, as indicated by the proliferation of special purpose public authorities and special districts on the metropolitan fringe (ACIR, 1964). The failure to plan for growth reflected not just a lack of administrative capacity at the state level but the fact that both cities and states now had their own federal-aid pipelines dominating bureaucratic and political attention, with few mechanisms or incentives to coordinate between them (Greer, 1962; Martin, 1965). In Canada, by contrast, the unchallenged jurisdiction and growing administrative capacity of the provinces was the primary condition behind an even bigger round of urban reform: the advent of two-tiered metropolitan governments.

Metropolitan reform

Though widely credited with saving Canadian cities from the decline that began to grip American cities after World War II, a closer look at the first of these metropolitan governments suggests that, at least initially, they were little different from the state-chartered public authorities and special districts multiplying across the United States. Metro Toronto, created by the Province of Ontario in 1953, was initially governed by a small, unelected council, which focused its efforts on accommodating suburban growth. Some three-quarters of the capital budget of Metro Toronto in the 1950s went to the construction of outlying roads, water supply, and trunk line sewers (Goldenberg, 1965) — causing one observer to describe the new government as a “giant construction company” (Smallwood, 1963: quoted in Vojnovic, 2000a: 207). In the mid-1960s, however, a noticeable shift in priorities began to transform Toronto into “the city that works” praised by a generation of observers (Donald, 2002). It was also from the mid-1960s that the new form of government was widely imitated by other provinces and held up as a model of metropolitan reform for the United States (CED, 1970).⁴

The best explanation for the replication of Ontario's metro experiment across Canada lies in the complex system of joint federal-provincial committees that emerged to fill Canada's distinctive constitutional gap: the absence of a direct role for the provinces in the federal government. This system, known as “executive federalism,” is responsible for the federal transfers and inter-provincial revenue sharing that became Canada's approach to the welfare state (Cameron & Simeon, 2002; Jenson, 1990). The positive change in Metro Toronto noted above coincided with the consolidation of this new system under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in the mid-1960s and reflects its institutional logic: Metro Toronto became a local template of executive federalism, replicating agreements and principles worked out at the federal level in policies like tax pooling and service equalization among the “federated” municipalities. Situating

⁴ Toronto was the first of 11 regional municipalities created by Ontario, which also reorganized many counties along similar lines. Manitoba created one for Winnipeg in 1960, which reverted to a unified city government in 1971, and Quebec did the same for Montreal and Quebec City in 1970, extending the basic structure to rural areas in 1979. British Columbia opted for a looser non-incorporated two-tiered structure for the Vancouver area in 1967.

Metro Toronto in this federal context also sharpens the contrast with the United States. Though a weak executive federalism exists in the United States in the form of peak organizations like the American Association of State Highway Officials (which is organized at the state level but negotiates directly with Congress and the federal bureaucracy), the more dominant institutional logic of the American party system produced a counterpart “legislative federalism” in the 1960s and 1970s, encouraging ever smaller communities to forge their own pipelines to the federal purse — thus reinforcing the political fragmentation in metropolitan areas (Conlan, 1998).

To this explanation, however, one must add a major shift in investment priorities *within* Metro Toronto that occurred substantially before the consolidation and localization of Canada’s welfare state. The origin of this shift was not a new federal mandate or provincial reform but the first sustained city–state fight in Ontario since the agitation for municipal self-rule in the 1830s. Less remarked in the Toronto story is the fact that the creation of Metro represented a substantial defeat for the old City of Toronto, which had initially sought to annex its suburbs outright. The province’s response — the new metro structure — not only kept the suburbs intact but also summarily stripped the city of its extensive property tax base and strong credit rating in the service of the suburban build-out. Timothy Colton (1980: 72) cites one member of the Toronto City Council decrying the new metropolitan government as “the greatest act of confiscation since the expulsion of the Acadians.” Unlike the American *quo warranto* of a century before, in which the City of New York was forced to surrender its entire charter to the state, the City of Toronto retained fully half of the representatives on the new Metro Council — giving it a strong position from which to fight back.

Although fights broke out on many fronts, the most significant was the “Great Subway Debate,” which pit city against suburban interests over the rising deficits of the city’s transit system (Friskien, 1986). Transit was in trouble across the industrialized world in the 1950s. Two things, however, caused deficits to blossom overnight just as the new Metro Council was taking its seat: completion of the city’s first subway line (approved by city voters in 1946) and a provincial mandate to extend bus service throughout the metropolitan region. The transit agency’s petition for relief from this dual burden set off a protracted debate between city and suburban representatives on the new council over the cause of the red ink, with the former blaming the expanded bus service and the latter blaming the new subway line. (The transit agency actually worsened the problem when it moved — twice — to raise fares, only to see its revenues shrink as riders used the excuse of high fares to switch to their cars.) The city’s representatives won in the end by demonstrating that the new subway line had already more than paid for itself in increased property values along its route (Goldenberg, 1965). On this evidence, they were able to secure not just relief for the transit deficits but a major east–west extension of the subway line in 1958, followed by another extension in 1963 that carried the new subway into the suburbs.

What the Great Subway Debate produced, in short, was a major rethinking of the Progressive era theories of scientific management. Transit was recast as a *derived* demand emerging from the general pattern of economic activity, as opposed to a profitable business vulnerable to corruption, while decisions about where and when to invest in new transportation systems were recast as an opportunity to shape urban growth. The report of the Royal Commission, created by the Province of Ontario to review the progress of Metropolitan Toronto in 1965, pointed to the new subway with pride, noting that despite a decline in the city’s population and a huge building boom in the suburbs, assessments for non-residential property in downtown Toronto had actually *increased* relative to the region as a whole (from 60 to 62% of the metro total) (Goldenberg, 1965). These changes are clearly reflected in the terms of the new subway

deal: the Metro Council paid for the acquisition and restoration of property along the proposed routes via additional property tax levies, leaving the transit agency to pay for the actual cost of construction (Goldenberg, 1965). It also shows up in the transportation models pioneered by Metro planners, who extended the insight to highway planning and began to emphasize improved access rather than increased traffic flow (Soberman, 1997). It shows up finally as the new property value gauge used by provincial administrators to measure the success of their Metro experiment (Goldenberg, 1965).

It was the institutionalization of this new approach to urban growth in an encompassing municipal structure, however, where the contrast with the United States was most acute. Though the idea that transportation should be cross-subsidized in metropolitan areas was highly influential in the United States — many special commissions and joint studies of the 1950s and 1960s made the same point — there was simply no institutional framework to make it work. Far more powerful than their Canadian counterparts, American cities had literally nowhere to turn in the 1950s as their transit systems began hemorrhaging and their downtowns began choking on cars. Transit regulation remained in the hands of state-appointed commissions with little accountability to urban voters and a history of complicity with the companies they oversaw (their rulings, not surprisingly, rationalized decline by allowing transit operators to abandon lines, cut back service and, most notoriously, to sell off operations to a subsidiary of General Motors) (St. Clair, 1986). Highway construction was controlled by state-level technocrats separated from city planners by high bureaucratic walls and deep partisan distain — a legacy that reached an extreme with the Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956, which gave state highway departments a blank check to build superhighways directly into the cities with no requirement for local input into their location or design (Seely, 1987). The only way for the cities to politicize their mounting concerns, in short, was to reassemble their New Deal coalition and work back through the cumbersome political system for a federal fix.

The North American state

To summarize the argument thus far, I have traced the diverging institutions and patterns of urbanization in the United States and Canada to a dialectic of city–state conflict conditioned by federal divisions of sovereignty and grounded in the expanding social property relations of capital. The common political condition behind each of these conflicts was the truncated sovereignty of the sub-national states, which created a material basis for political conflict with the industrializing cities. The primary condition behind the cities' success was an aspect of the local political process that encompassed — and could thus politicize — the local effects of capitalist industrialization. In the American struggle for home rule, it was the working class vote, to which bourgeois reformers hoping to wrest power from the political machines were forced to appeal. In post-war Toronto, it was the geographical reach of the new metropolitan government created by the Province of Ontario, which gave the city's bourgeoisie, though stripped and demoted, a metropolitan voice. The remarkable outcomes — a working class political breakthrough in the United States and a re-valorization of the old city form in Canada — confirm the potency of urban politics in a capitalist social formation, an insight that extends across many applications and iterations of Marxist and post-Marxist theory (Lauria, 1997; Lefebvre, 1991). At the same time, they also reveal an unusual weakness of North American cities as a self-governing political form. This is once again most striking in the United States, where the institutional vehicle for the cities' breakthrough to national power was a national political party whose distributive rationality rapidly dissipated their New Deal gains (Mollenkopf, 1983).

In Canada, it was an even more vulnerable municipal form created by the provinces, which the provinces could – and did – reorganize at will.

Over the past 20 years, the history of the North American city has turned once again, with many of Canada's metropolitan regions following their American counterparts into a pattern of urban decline and suburban sprawl. In the next section, I situate this more recent development in the same dialectic of city–state conflict that produced the institutional divergence chronicled above by shifting the focus from institutional changes in the cities to the formation of the sub-national states.

Glorified municipalities

A first-cut description of the effect of the conflicts described above on the sub-national states is that they have simply taken the cities' place, becoming what the disgruntled delegate from New Brunswick at Charlottetown dismissed as “glorified municipal governments” (quoted in [Smith, 1993](#): 84). This is most apparent in Canada where successive efforts by the provinces to cure urban problems through better design inexorably drew them in, first as infrastructure regulator and provider, then as municipal receiver, and finally as administrator of federal welfare programs via the creation of regional municipalities. It also shows up in the United States in the wholesale transformation of the sub-national states since the early 1960s – coincident with the cities' decline – from sleepy outposts whose legislatures met once every other year, to modern administrative edifices managing all aspects of the welfare state. Traditional municipal concerns like housing, education, and healthcare dominate at the sub-national level of government in both federations today, accounting for approximately 75% of all provincial expenditures in Canada and 60% of state expenditures in the United States ([Statistics Canada, 2006b](#); [US Census Bureau, 2006](#)).

If municipalization is the substance of this transformation, the relevant concept is the “local state,” a concept that emerged out of the same debates in Marxism that produced the theory of the central state from which this inquiry began ([Cockburn, 1977](#)). The effort to distinguish a local political form via the same method – careful specification of its role in the accumulation process – never achieved the same conceptual clarity as the theory of the state as a unified whole. Initial attempts focused on institutions of “collective consumption” that socialize the reproduction of labor power, and thus failed to anticipate the wholesale unraveling of the welfare state over the past 30 years ([Duncan & Goodwin, 1987](#)). Other efforts tended toward the opposite extreme, eschewing questions of political form in favor of contingent processes associated with “growth machines,” understood as coalitions of capitalists that construct their own pipelines to the public purse, and the popular resistance they provoke ([Jonas & Wilson, 1999](#); [Logan & Molotch, 1987](#)). More recently, Marxist scholars have used the term “local state” to refer to the strategic agency of the central state in response to the globalization of economic activity ([N. Brenner, 2004](#); [Jones, 1998](#)). Missing in all these formulations is a way of grasping the *constitutionalized* sovereignty of the sub-national states. The actual process of municipalization traced in the narrative above was often a simple assertion of sub-national jurisdiction, overriding appeals from the urban working class and bourgeoisie alike. Whole categories of municipal functions were summarily lifted from the cities or transferred to public authorities.

A more consistent take on what the states and provinces of North America have become is that they simply reverted to what they were: a pre-capitalist residual. From the extension of public utilities in the Progressive era, to the large-scale road building programs of the 1920s

and 1930s, to the multiplication of public authorities and regional municipalities after World War II, the primary beneficiaries of sub-national policy in both the United States and Canada have been the owners of *non-urban* land — the realm in which sub-national sovereignty remained largely intact. More than a pre-capitalist residual, however, one can also see the emergence of a distinctively *liberal* ideology and jurisprudence in this sub-national realm. This was apparent right from the start with the advent of legal formalism in the 1830s, which attempted to cure the distributive excesses of sub-national legislatures via legal principles designed to allow society, effectively, to run without them. Applied to the cities, of course, legal formalism fostered widespread fragmentation and corruption, setting off a search for the opposite cure in the form of better functional designs. Another application of legal formalism, however, had far more success. In the wake of their concession of home rule to the big cities, American states quickly extended the privilege to all municipalities regardless of size (Mott, 1949), creating a very different municipal form on the urban fringe.

Municipal corporate liberalism

Although municipal home rule was the product of a protracted struggle by big city voters and politicians, as noted above, its extension to smaller municipalities is best understood as another application of legal formalist reasoning. Rather than creating a new “special privilege” for the cities, state legislators simply reversed their initial ruralizing approach to municipal law and elevated small towns to the legal status of a big city (Fox, 1977). Home rule as such remained a latent capacity for most small towns (Mott, 1949), with the notable exception of small towns in the vicinity of big cities, where historians have documented a vigorous, though fairly narrow, application of the new home rule powers to the conversion of agricultural land to residential subdivisions (Fischler, 1998). The specific power invoked here — the right to designate and enforce specific uses of land via a municipal zoning code — found a ready application on the urban fringe, where the widespread distribution of land in fee simple had fostered an unusually haphazard pattern of urban growth as industry began to decentralize around the turn of the 20th century (Walker & Lewis, 2001).⁵ Like poorly located factories in the cities, rapid, speculative subdivision of land — “land butchering” as contemporaries called it — threatened not just the public health but the public purse, necessitating costly retrofits for basic services and utilities like sewers and streets. Many developers quickly realized, however, that a proper municipal zoning code could also *enhance* the value of land well beyond the profits of a quick subdivision by protecting them from haphazard development on adjacent land. It was the necessary political condition, in short, behind the rise of a new type of developer Marc Weiss (1987) calls “community builders,” who began to stage and build whole new communities on the urban fringe.

To put this development in Marxist terms, the extension of home rule to small towns on the urban fringe created the potential for well-positioned landowners to capture not just the windfall profits from the initial subdivision of agricultural land — a kind of primitive accumulation — but the self-reinforcing valorization of land from development around it. This is because municipal zoning created a capacity to create and enforce the most critical attribute

⁵ Land-use zoning was the product of another fight of the big cities, this one played out in the courts rather than the state legislatures, for the right to regulate uses of land without the threat of a ‘takings suit’ under the 5th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The specific form that the new power took was a comprehensive municipal ordinance that *fixed* the uses of land. This was the only way to satisfy courts of the time that it was not an arbitrary exercise of power by corrupt politicians but a valid exercise of their delegated police powers from the state (Fischler, 1998).

of urban land as a commodity form: its location relative to other urban land uses (Harvey, 1982). The advent of small-town home rule was similar in this respect to the extension of “legal personhood” to private corporations by the U.S. Supreme Court a few years before (*Santa Clara County v Southern Pacific R. R.* [118 U.S. 394, 1886]), which scholars have labeled “corporate liberalism” (Sklar, 1988). In both cases, a core liberal ideal — the right to due process of law and protection from undue government “takings,” respectively — was recast in a corporate mold, significantly enhancing the potential gains of property holders therein. The most widely accepted view of municipal zoning in mainstream economic theory today is a “collective property right” that attaches directly to the land, with town governments acting in a fiduciary capacity similar to that of a corporate board (Levine, 2006). And though the political autonomy implied in home rule is even more problematic from a legal standpoint than corporate personhood, American courts have deferred to municipal zoning decisions for decades against a broad array of legal challenges (Barron, 2003; Briffault, 1990). Like the expanded rights of corporate shareholders, finally, the new corporatized property rights of suburban landowners contributed to the speculative excesses that ushered in the Great Depression, as each town competed for the same limited market of middle- and upper-income homebuyers, as well as the federal rescue for the commodity on top of that reformatted land in the New Deal: the extensive system of insurance, tax breaks and subsidies that extended the opportunity for homeownership way down the social ladder (Weiss, 1987).

Though municipal home rule was absent in Canada, there was, nonetheless, a widespread adoption of this substantive content. As with public utility commissions and corporate models of governance, municipal zoning was widely viewed in Canada as another scientific advance of the Progressive era. Though initially controlled by provincial administrators, who opted for the more holistic approach of British town planning, there was increasing deference to local land-use control in Canada, especially after World War II (Van Nus, 1979). Most of the new “regional municipalities” modeled on Metro Toronto left land-use decisions in the hands of the towns even as decisions about the infrastructure required to service that land rose to the metropolitan level (Plunkett, 1968; Rose, 1972). Although the federated design of Canada’s metropolitan governments mitigated many of the inequities and inefficiencies found in U.S. metropolitan regions, where the ideology of home rule sanctioned widespread disparities in the provision of basic municipal services (Levine, 2006), it created perhaps even greater incentives for the conversion of agricultural land to commercial and residential use on at the urban fringe. The Canadian regional municipality combined, in effect, the corporatized property rights of municipal zoning with an integrated “construction machine” for public works. It is no surprise from this perspective that the metropolitan region of Toronto today is 10 times the size of the original metropolitan government of 1953. The four new regional municipalities that the Province of Ontario cloned on this urban fringe in the early 1970s have built themselves out with the same vigor and efficiency that Metropolitan Toronto did a generation before (Friskin, Bourne, Gad, & Murdie, 1997).⁶

Sub-national state formation and the urban process

In the mid-1980s, responding to changes widely associated with the unraveling of the post-war Fordist order, Canada’s federal government began to cut back on the inter-provincial fiscal

⁶ The new amalgamated City of Toronto is about 600 km², while the four new regional governments around it total over 6000 km² (Statistics Canada, 2006a).

transfers that had formed the backbone of the Canadian welfare state. The provinces responded with a new round of municipal reform, which took the form of a wholesale dismantling of two-tiered governments in urban areas. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, unified governments were imposed in Metropolitan Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, Halifax, and Ottawa, along with fiscal responsibility for many of the downsized federal programs. The intent to shift the burden of social spending onto the cities made these reforms a target of popular wrath, forcing some to be scaled back (Boudreau, 1999; Keil, 2000; Vojnovic, 2000b). Anti-amalgamation protests spilled into the streets and broadened into a general political movement that replicated many of the themes and strategies from an earlier generation of city–state conflict in the United States. Most evocative in this regard was the call for a “New Deal for Canada’s cities,” which sought to leverage the cities’ political ties to a national party in order to create a direct city link to the federal purse (Godfrey, 2004). This effort managed to secure two small funds pinned to the federal gas tax before the Liberal Party was ousted in early 2006. Even more notable has been the call for greater municipal autonomy. Beginning with Alberta in 1994, the provinces of Canada have completely revamped their old 19th-century approach to municipal government, replacing statutes that itemized each specific power with broad “spheres of influence” over which municipalities have presumptive control (FCM, 2006). British Columbia went the farthest with its Community Charter of 2003, which explicitly recognizes municipalities as a distinct “order of government” that is “autonomous, responsible, and accountable” (part 1.1). The response of Ontario — the province that attracted the most popular wrath in the anti-amalgamation debate — was a thorough rewriting of the Baldwin Act of 1849, the original Canadian version of municipal law based on the legal formalist precedents of New York State.

If this recent recasting of city–province relations in Canada holds — and the cities have already begun the long march to the Canadian Supreme Court to affirm their new statutory autonomy (Valverde & Levi, 2005) — it confirms the tendency first discerned in old New York: the sub-national states of North America have become distinctively *capitalist* states in their sovereign realm. The extension of zoning powers to municipalities on the urban fringe has enabled a vast conversion of agricultural land to urban use in a recognizably liberal way: through an expansion and generalization of property rights as opposed to top down controls. It was a necessary political condition for the type of real estate market we see on the metropolitan fringe of both countries today, where thousands of individual landowners respond to thousands of market signals in a quest to maximize their property values. Because that land was wired into the capital markets from the start as so many securitized titles to future streams of rent, mortgages payments, and capital gains, it is also possible to tie this political transformation to the remarkable “spatial fix” of post-war American Fordism (Harvey, 1985) as well as the increasingly volatile real estate cycles that have emerged in its wake (R. Brenner, 2004). The municipal law of the sub-national states helps explain, in short, why the urban landscapes of North America are increasingly the opposite of the old North American city, not only in the physical lay of the land but also their growing abstraction from the urban process itself. They have become landscapes of exchange value, spatially extending the basic misrecognition at the core of capitalist social property relations that capital — in this case, *landed* capital — is the source of value.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Leo Panitch and Richard Walker for their incisive reading and helpful comments.

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