Comment on Hollander’s “The bounds of smart decline: a foundational theory for planning shrinking cities”

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Introduction
In recent years, the present condition and uncertain future of America’s shrinking cities have become a matter of considerable public interest and the idea that cities should plan strategies around the realities of their markedly smaller populations has emerged as an important subject for scholarly research, planning practice and urban policy intervention. While this idea represents a legitimate, and arguably long overdue, response to a cluster of difficult issues that have been decades in the making, at the same time, as Hollander reminds us, it raises important issues of equity and social justice. These are not new issues in urban policy, but they are critically important ones; Hollander provides a valuable service by stressing the extent to which, as new planning tools to address the distinct condition of shrinking cities begin to emerge, the social justice concerns they raise must be recognized and addressed.

It is important, moreover, as Hollander recognizes, that social equity concerns be explicitly addressed, rather than seen as an implicit and therefore easily overlooked or distorted element in the substructure of policy formation. Most planners, and arguably most urban public officials and policymakers, would probably characterize themselves as politically liberal, and therefore concerned at some level with social justice. Whether or not, as some scholars argue, the ideology of liberalism is inherently at odds with serious conceptions of social justice (Imbroscio 2010), as history has taught us, when they are no more than values they are easily subverted by other concerns.

The question remains, however, what theory of social justice, understood in the most fundamental sense of a just distribution of rights, opportunities1 and resources (Barry 2005), and what application of that theory to the planning of shrinking cities, are most likely to be conductive to realizing just outcomes. I would argue that it is necessary to go beyond Hollander’s formulation if one is to build a theoretical framework that can indeed help foster that goal. This comment will first try to re-frame the underlying problem represented by shrinking cities; and second, while it

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1Although legitimate distinctions can be made, within the frame of reference of this comment, there is considerable overlap between the use of the term opportunities, not only by Barry but in its general use in urban planning and social policy, and the use of the term capabilities in Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000).
will not attempt to present a full-blown alternative foundational theory, it will address some of the issues that need to be confronted if one is to construct an alternative foundational theory capable of guiding practice and policy.

**Shrinkage as a symptom, not a disease**

Urban shrinkage, as defined by substantial or sustained population loss, is a product of the working of multiple economic, social, and spatial forces; population loss, in turn, has a powerful effect on the social, economic and spatial dynamics of the city experiencing shrinkage. While this may appear to be self-evident, I make the point to stress that the issue and the object of policy intervention is not shrinkage *per se*, but the economic, social, and spatial correlates of shrinkage. The underlying mechanisms by which urban depopulation has taken place in post-industrial Rust Belt cities, such as Youngstown or Detroit, which reflect a series of suburban and inter-regional migratory patterns linked with systemic deindustrialization, led to important consequences, which were particularly pronounced in those cities that had few strong economic sectors beyond manufacturing.

As these processes unfolded over more than 50 years, they led not only to significant population loss, but to dramatic changes in the city’s economic and spatial features. As the number of jobs – particularly unionized manufacturing jobs, which offered middle-class wages for workers with little formal education – declined and middle-class families suburbanized, the population of shrinking cities became increasingly impoverished and disconnected from the labor force. Over 30 percent of the population of Detroit, MI, and Gary, IN, are below the poverty level, with those of other shrinking cities not much less. In many of these cities, the Black population share rose as total population declined, reflecting the continued relationship between race and poverty in American society.

The spatial correlative of shrinkage is property underutilization and vacancy, reflecting low demand not only for housing, but for other components of the built environment such as storefronts, office buildings, industrial buildings, and churches. The number of households who live or work in these cities is far smaller than the supply of homes and workspaces available, and market activity is far too small to absorb more than a small part of the built inventory that becomes available through turnover or other reasons. Although Detroit removed 178,000 dwelling units or 32 percent of its 1960 housing stock between 1960 and 2000, the number of vacant houses and vacant lots in the city steadily increased. With rare exceptions, vacant land created through demolition has no redevelopment potential, because the market

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2In that respect, I differ with Hollander’s conclusion with respect to Sunbelt cities that the “basic physical processes and policy responses have much in common [with Rust Belt cities].” There are fundamental differences in both physical processes and policy responses between long-term systemic decline and what is currently taking place in some Sunbelt cities. While the course of these cities over the next decade or two may ultimately be one of systemic decline, it is at best premature to draw that conclusion at present.

3Although it should be noted that between 2000 and 2010 the Black population declined in absolute numbers by more than 10 percent in many shrinking cities, including Detroit, Flint, Cleveland and Youngstown.

4This figure, which is an estimate, is derived by comparing the number of dwelling units reported in the 1960 Census with the number of dwelling units dating from 1960 or earlier in the 2000 Census. Changes in Census methodology make it impossible to bring the figure current to 2010.
cost of existing sound structures is so far below replacement cost.\(^5\) Today, Detroit has some 90,000 vacant parcels and over 30,000 vacant residential structures (Data Driven Detroit 2010). In many of the city’s blocks, half or more of the residential parcels are vacant land (Figure 1).

All of these changes have affected the distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources within these cities and regions. The region’s lower income households and people of color, who are disproportionately concentrated in the cities,\(^6\) have suffered disproportionately from the resulting maldistribution, as reflected in reduced income and employment opportunities, inadequate municipal services and deteriorating

\(^5\)An exception of sorts can be made for heavily subsidized developments, such as low income tax credit rental housing projects. These developments, however, are often highly problematic, since they typically create new housing units at rent levels no lower than in the private market, further exacerbating the already substantial housing surplus in the city or neighborhood and potentially increasing abandonment within the private market stock.

\(^6\)While 45 percent of Cincinnati’s population is African-American, only 6 percent of the balance of the metro’s population is African-American; while only 8 percent of the metro’s white population lives in the city, 54 percent of the metro’s African-American population lives in Cincinnati. Poverty concentrations tend to be less extreme than racial concentrations, but still significant. Although only 14 percent of its metro’s population lives in the city of Cincinnati, 31 percent of the metro’s poor live in the city. Other older cities and their metro areas show similar disparities. In some metro areas, such as those of Cleveland and Newark, some older inner-ring suburbs have also become disproportionately poor and Black, such as East Cleveland or Irvington, New Jersey.
infrastructure, and the manifold harms arising from living in proximity to abandoned houses, contaminated vacant industrial sites, and overgrown vacant lots.

Policies and strategies adopted by shrinking cities, therefore, whether characterized as ‘rightsizing,’ ‘smart decline’ or ‘growing smaller,’ do not operate on shrinkage per se, but on one or more of the economic or spatial correlates of shrinkage, nor do they seek to perpetuate shrinkage, but rather – building on a realistic base that recognizes the city’s historic shrinkage – seek to change the city’s economic and spatial conditions in such a way that the city may be able to stabilize its population and economic base and, perhaps, begin to grow again. The ultimate test of how and whether policy interventions further social justice is the extent to which specific policies designed to pursue these goals successfully address the maldistribution of rights, opportunities and resources that exist within the city or region under consideration.

Grounding social justice in outcomes

If a fundamental lesson flows from the preceding discussion, as well as from the entire body of literature on economic development, growth, and social processes, it is that any theory of social justice must be grounded primarily in outcomes, and only secondarily in process; Fainstein’s (2001) conclusion that “overemphasis on participation and decentralization evades the issue of just distribution” is nowhere more relevant than in shrinking cities. It is correct, of course, that one cannot advocate a specific outcome for a specific set of local circumstances without knowing, in Hollander’s words, “each locality’s history, its political and economic engines, existing power structures (etc) . . .” It is certainly not the case, however, that one needs that level of local knowledge to frame criteria or standards for what can reasonably be considered just outcomes. Failure to acknowledge this distinction can easily lead one down a slippery slope into a morass of unresolvable relativism.

This comment will illustrate the ways in which outcomes can be evaluated from a social justice perspective through two examples, one dealing with economic and the other with spatial policy. Both will also illustrate a further important point in attempting to frame a workable theory of planning and social justice; in contrast to philosophical abstractions, social justice outcomes in the real world, where power relationships, the complexities of competing individual and group interests, and the compromises inherent in any political system all coexist, are likely to be both

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7 A further correlative of the economic effects of shrinkage is that these resource-poor cities are increasingly unable to provide even a minimally adequate level of public services to their residents, or to maintain networks of infrastructure and facilities initially designed for a much larger population. Many such cities are currently teetering on the edge of bankruptcy (Muro and Hoene 2009).

8 I am uncomfortable with the descriptor ‘smart decline’ that Hollander uses to characterize his proposed approach, a term that would seem to imply, at best, a process of managing continued decline, and at worst, a deliberate decision to continue to decline. Whether such a process, or such a decision, however, may be appropriate for any of the cities under consideration is a complex and difficult issue arguably worthy of examination, but one well beyond the scope of this comment. The fact remains, however, that continued decline is not a goal of any community with which I am familiar.

9 This was very much the case with respect to what are the two principal European shrinking city ‘success stories’, Leipzig and Manchester, both of which have stabilized their populations and showed some signs of net population growth in recent years (Ferrari and Roberts 2004, Power et al. 2010).
ambiguous and contingent. Rather than there being a single right answer, or a single right strategy, there are a multitude of conflicting answers, each with their own trade-offs, which need to be mediated through process.

A goal that shrinking cities share is that of rebuilding their local economies, to which end a wide range of strategies, many strongly contested, have been proposed. Success at that goal should enable cities to create jobs, increase public sector revenues (and thus improve public services), increase opportunities for business formation, and ultimately, stabilize or grow the population. It is reasonable to argue that choosing the specific strategy a city should pursue requires detailed local knowledge; it should be possible, however, to frame criteria as to what outcomes would meet the test of social justice.

One could reasonably argue, for example, that a just economic development strategy must be to some extent redistributional. Thus, an initiative that resulted in the creation of a number of new jobs, all of which were filled by highly-educated immigrants to the city, might fail by that standard. Suppose, however, as is often the case, some of the new jobs are indeed filled by local low-income residents, and that the infusion of incremental tax revenues will result in some improvement in public services, at least some of which will benefit currently underserved low-income areas. The social justice test, at that point, requires going beyond that level of analysis and examining the extent to which the particular initiative might also have negative effects, such as the displacement of residents or small, minority-owned businesses, or the extent to which that initiative will impose opportunity costs that precluded other more redistributive activities. Social justice might similarly require that alternative strategies be evaluated in advance for their potential redistributive effect.

A second example can be found in an idea that has been much discussed in recent years, although to my knowledge never actually carried out. As planners look at areas that have been heavily disinvested and today only contain a handful of homes scattered among vacant land and abandoned structures, some have proposed that government relocate those residents into parts of the city where neighborhood fabric is more intact. Several arguments have been offered for such a policy, including increasing access of those residents to better services and facilities, reducing public infrastructure and service delivery costs, and facilitating the reuse of vacant land for ‘green’ uses, such as urban agriculture or wetlands restoration.

Within the range of possible ways such a policy could hypothetically be implemented, it would appear likely that any approach that involved use of the coercive power of the state (explicitly or implicitly) to compel people to move, where their health and safety were not directly at risk, would not be compatible with social justice. Assuming that relocation was entirely voluntary, that the opportunities and resources of the relocated residents were enhanced as a result, and that the benefits of vacating the areas from which they were relocated inured to the public, one could then make a case that the policy furthered social justice.

10Fainstein (2006) offers a useful analysis of these issues as they applied to a project in the Bronx, where a market occupied by minority-owned small businesses was demolished and the owners dispersed, in order to accommodate a substantially larger and largely generic shopping mall developed by a major developer. Fainstein’s analysis is nuanced, and represents a thoughtful attempt to draw upon the thinking of philosophers such as Rawls, Nussbaum and Harvey to help illuminate the world of everyday reality, which could have profitably been integrated by AUTHOR into his analysis.

11Mayor Bing of Detroit has expressed his intention to pursue this strategy (Oosting 2010).
Matters, predictably, are not so straightforward. Assuming that some households would choose not to relocate, the outcome of the process might well impair their access to resources and opportunities. Alternatively, the city might well not be able to reduce services or decommission infrastructure because of their continued presence. If the city, as is likely, would have to incur significant costs to pursue such a policy, using funds that could be applied to address other pressing public needs, the justification for such a policy from a social justice – as well as other – perspective would be less clear.

While these two illustrations point out the difficulty of reaching unequivocal conclusions about the intersection of public policy and social justice in shrinking cities, they also point out that the process of establishing standards and criteria for evaluating outcomes, while complex, is a highly achievable project. An approach that focuses on process alone, however important process may be as a means of reaching more rather than less just outcomes, by avoiding the difficult but necessary effort of grappling with the complexities and ambiguities of outcomes, is, as Fainstein noted, an evasion.

The limitations of process

Just outcomes may require an open process. “Open processes,” however, “do not necessarily produce just outcomes” (Fainstein 2006, 23). As she has written elsewhere, “the communicative ideal, derived from Habermas and applied to cities by many planning theorists, neglects fundamental questions of inequality in power, opportunity and resources” (Fainstein 2001, 885). Not only do these fundamental imbalances, which are arguably inherent in any system, undermine the effect of ideal processes, but the reality of process is far different from the ideal of Habermas and others, which implicitly assumes a public sphere in which all voices are being heard in roughly equal measure, and, where, as one scholar has characterized it, “ideal institutions rule out authority based on anything other than a good argument” (Dryzek, quoted in Bolton 2005, 2).

Such a process does not exist. Not only is process invariably compromised by the inequalities in power, opportunities and resources, but, as a vehicle for seeking social justice, it is further vitiated by the cacophony of voices proffering varying definitions of social justice and even more widely varying definitions of how social justice is served in any particular case, as well as the frequent disparity between the strength of the voices being heard and the sentiments and concerns of those they purport to represent. While elections may offer a crude measure of popular, or at least voter, sentiment, even such inadequate measures are unavailable to assess the extent to which an individual speaker or organization represents a broadly or narrowly held position.

In the final analysis, “the community,” that term so widely used in the field of community development and participatory processes, is more a metaphysical than a practical concept. In any community, however defined spatially, demographically or

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12The crux of the problem is that the typical house in a heavily disinvested, abandoned area in a city such as Detroit or Youngstown has no market value (nor does the land underneath it), so that the entire financial burden of making the occupant whole with respect to living conditions and quality of life, including the cost of providing the household with an alternative dwelling of good quality, falls on the public sector.
otherwise, diverse attitudes, viewpoints, perspectives and desires exist, and – except for the rare moments when people unite in opposition to a specific threat – there are few effective ways to merge them into a single discourse. One can easily imagine circumstances where an open process designed to elicit resident positions for or against a spatial policy of the sort described above might trigger a strong show of vocal opposition, while the majority, or at least plurality, of the residents felt quite differently. To the extent that public discourse is still often driven by considerations of group identity, that reality renders the problem of creating a meaningful process that much more difficult.

None of this is to suggest that process is not important, even critical, in the search for social justice. For all its flaws and limitations, where significant questions of social justice are at stake, an open and participatory process is invariably to be preferred to the alternative, which is that of decision-making behind closed doors by politicians and bureaucrats, whether local or far removed, or whether driven by their own values and ideals or manipulated by financial and corporate interests. Ultimately, however, someone will have to make the decision. In a world that is other than an idealized plebiscitary universe, that someone will invariably be a smaller body than everyone. At that point, the likelihood of social justice prevailing is far less unless the decision is guided by a thoughtful, well-grounded assessment of the outcomes that will flow from the different alternatives available to the decision-makers.

References

13A very recent and still-unpublished survey of 3,000 households in the East Side of Detroit conducted by Community Legal Resources found that roughly 50 percent of the residents were eager to move out of the area, while approximately 35 percent preferred to stay (Communication from Sam Butler, Community Legal Resources, May 19, 2011).