

**Ideology  
and the  
Urban Crisis**

Peter J.  
Steinberger



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**title:** Ideology and the Urban Crisis SUNY Series  
On Urban Public Policy  
**author:** Steinberger, Peter J.  
**publisher:** State University of New York Press  
**isbn10 | asin:** 0873959574  
**print isbn13:** 9780873959575  
**ebook isbn13:** 9780585091242  
**language:** English  
**subject** Urban policy, Ideology.  
**publication date:** 1985  
**lcc:** JS91.S73 1985eb  
**ddc:** 320.8  
**subject:** Urban policy, Ideology.

# Ideology and the Urban Crisis

SUNY Series in Urban Public Policy  
Mark Schneider and Richard Rich, Editors

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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS  
ALBANY

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

1985 State University of New York

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For information, address State University of New York  
Press, State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y., 12246

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Steinberger, Peter J., 1948-  
Ideology and the urban crisis.

(SUNY series on urban public policy)

Bibliography: p. 163

Includes index.

1. Urban policy. 2. Ideology. I. Title. II. Series.

JS91.S73 1984 320.8 84-8637

ISBN 0-87395-956-6

ISBN 0-87395-957-4 (pbk.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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## Preface

This book is intended primarily for students of urban politics who are interested in normative questions but who have no systematic background in political philosophy. During the past fifteen years or so, a large literature has emerged which treats the crisis of the cities from a perspective that might be variously termed normative, prescriptive, or ideological. This literature includes treatises on urban planning, exercises in public choice theory, populist and Marxist analyses, essays on urban reform, and the like. Some of these writings have earned considerable attention and even notoriety. But the unfortunate bifurcation of much graduate education in social and political science has left many urbanists unconfident in dealing with such materials. My goal, therefore, has been to organize the normative literature so as to make it more comprehensible and to provide a basis for its intelligent criticism.

The book is also intended for political philosophers who have a serious though secondary interest in urban problems. I would hope to have provided them with a novel synthesis of normative urban theory and a distinctive critique of the normative materials. I would hope further to have described some of the requirements of a more satisfying philosophy of urban politics.

My aims are thus rather modest. The chapters that follow report no new findings regarding the urban crisis and no startling interpretations in political philosophy. I have simply sought to read the major normative theories of city politics in the light of certain important traditions of political thought. In the process, I have overlooked many of the empirical complexities of the urban crisis and have offered occasionally one-sided readings of difficult philosophical texts; I have done so in

the interest of providing to the extent possible a synthesis that is at once accurate, accessible, and concise.

For example, I have assumed without argument that there is indeed an urban crisis. Many would disagree with this, but to have made the argument against them would have required a very different kind of book. Moreover, the analyses that do appear here are largely unaffected by the issue of whether or not there is a crisis; indeed, the book might have been more accurately, if less dramatically, entitled *Ideology and Urban Politics*.

Similarly, though far more seriously, at numerous points complex problems in political philosophy have been ignored, circumvented, or even dangerously oversimplified. But to have given a full account of, say, Hobbes's theory of obligation or the debate in ethics over utilitarianism or the foundations of natural rights theory would have required a book many times longer than the present one and would have taken the discussion very far indeed from the realities of the urban crisis. Still, I am hopeful that the analyses provided are, as far as they go, faithful to the basic themes of the texts in question.

My main arguments arise out of a certain dissatisfaction with conventional references to ideologies of urban politics. It is common to classify such ideologies as being either neo-conservative, reformist, or radical. Such a division, obviously useful for some purposes, is simply not very helpful in dealing with the urban-oriented materials. For example, Robert Nisbet is typically and correctly thought to be a neoconservative. Yet the import of his work for the urban crisis with its emphasis on alienation and community is deeply incompatible with that of another neoconservative, Edward Banfield, for whom problems such as alienation can play no major role in any sensible discussion of urban policy. The writings of a third neoconservative, Hadley Arkes, emphasize the peculiarly ethical dimensions of city politics and are, again, largely unrelated to the concerns of Nisbet and Banfield. Thus, the category "neoconservative" turns out not to mean very much when applied to the urban crisis. If anything, the so-called reformist and radical approaches are even more diffuse and incoherent.

The typology upon which the present book is based—managerialism, communalism, and possessive individualism

cuts across the more conventional view. It classifies approaches less in terms of manifest attitudes and recommendations than in terms of underlying theoretical presuppositions. There are, no doubt, problems with this taxonomy and some may feel that I have exaggerated differences and minimized similarities. Nonetheless, my scheme is offered in the belief that it is more responsive to what is truly important in the urban literature and provides a better basis for understanding controversies concerning urban politics and policy.

This book was written with the generous support of Reed College and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Emmett Buell and Lewis Anthony Dexter, among others, provided encouragement at an early stage of the project. Charles Adrian helped me get at least some of my facts straight; but I am indebted to him for much else besides. Four anonymous reviewers read the entire manuscript for SUNY Press and provided helpful comments. To all of these individuals and institutions I am most grateful. I also owe a debt of a rather different kind to Thomas P. Jenkin, late of the University of California at Riverside.

1.

## Ideology and the Urban Crisis

The urban crisis discovered in the mid-1960s, dismissed as a myth in the early 1970s has reemerged as a central fact of American life. Fiscal insolvency, rising crime rates, white flight, environmental decay, chaos in education such factors contribute to the atmosphere of crisis that surrounds the governance of many of our major cities. If at times the crisis image has been used too indiscriminately, we can nonetheless stipulate that much of urban America is currently plagued by conditions which do indeed threaten the good health and essential welfare of society.

Conditions such as these prompt people to think, and to articulate their thoughts in a coherent, systematic fashion. Indeed, those who study urban affairs have thought a great deal about the urban crisis, and have done so in a number of identifiable ways. The purpose of this book is to look at some of those ways, focusing in particular on "normative writings" which seek to *evaluate* and *prescribe* methods of urban governance.

My task in part is simply to survey the field, to provide a brief inventory of books and essays that approach the urban crisis from one or another ideological perspective. My deeper purpose, though, is to look critically at such perspectives and to uncover and assess the underlying philosophies upon which they are based. This is a crucial task. For the arguments of social critics and social visionaries invariably reflect deep-seated assumptions about right and wrong and about the way in which the world operates. Such assumptions are rarely made explicit, yet their influence on ideological thinking is absolutely decisive. My goal, therefore, is to understand urban ideologies by revealing their various moral and epistemological roots.

In doing so, it is hoped that some light can be shed on the urban crisis itself. To be sure, this book is in a sense just another exercise in "ideology," a treatise in the history of ideas, hence not immediately concerned with empirical reality. But when confronting a reality that plagues us and seems intractable, ideas are really all we have. Our solutions to difficult problems can only be intellectual solutions, solutions that we have *thought up*. Thus, if our thinking is somehow flawed if our ideas make no sense, are based on implausible premises, fail the tests of logic and rationality then our solutions can probably be no better. To make headway against the ills of our cities requires an intellectual orientation that stands up to criticism and that emerges as a view which we can judge to be both plausible and persuasive.

### Political Science and the City

Since the 1920s, political scientists have eagerly sought to make their discipline truly scientific. Indeed, the so-called behavioral persuasion has come to dominate scholarship and research in most areas of American political inquiry. The consequences of this have been significant. Proponents of behavioralism can now claim, with much justification, that our knowledge and understanding of the political world has increased considerably. The application of scientific methods to the study of politics has, in particular, yielded a great deal of useful information regarding the political opinions and activities of American citizens. Beyond this, behavioralists have also been responsible for expanding our theoretical or explanatory knowledge of politics, i.e., our knowledge about *why* individuals behave the way they do. To be sure, genuine achievements in this latter respect have been much harder to come by; nonetheless, we can certainly credit behavioralists with advancing and supporting a number of genuinely provocative and original hypotheses concerning political behavior. By 1961 one of the foremost behavioralists could reasonably write at length of the behavioral movement as a major intellectual success, a successful revolution. 1

One unfortunate consequence of the behavioral revolution, however, has been the bifurcation of political science and

political philosophy. In brief, political "scientists" seek to analyze politics by relying on tools and methods borrowed from the natural sciences. They identify themselves as impartial observers who test hypotheses by gathering and manipulating discrete bits of empirical data. Political "philosophers," on the other hand, rely on a conceptual apparatus derived from the history of political thought. Their concern is with the rational meaning of the state and associated concepts; and this concern naturally leads to a preoccupation with *normative* questions, i.e., questions of values and morals. It may be that the differences between these two modes of inquiry have been exaggerated, especially by those who have periodically proclaimed the demise of political philosophy. 2 Nonetheless, the fact remains that a certain persistent division of labor does tend to characterize the academic study of politics. Behavioralists frequently undertake their investigations without adequately consulting the philosophic texts; and normative theorists are too often guilty of ignoring the empirical findings of social science. That this bifurcation need not persist is widely believed; rarely, however, is anything done about it.<sup>3</sup>

The split between political science and political philosophy seems to have especially plagued the study of urban politics. Curiously, the behavioral persuasion did not really come to dominate urban political science until rather late in the game. In fact, as late as 1957 Laurence J.R. Herson could lament in a famous article the lack of scientific, behavioral research into urban problems and politics. Herson argued in part that urbanists had been excessively concerned with normative questions and that these concerns had contaminated existing empirical studies. He wished to see urban politics approached from a behavioral viewpoint, one that focused on actual political activity and that utilized scientific, value-neutral research techniques.<sup>4</sup>

To a great extent, Herson's complaint was justified. With a few notable exceptions, urbanists tended to be primarily concerned with describing and reforming, rather than systematically explaining, the urban political process. Indeed, it was not until 1955 that the first behaviorally oriented urban textbook was published.<sup>5</sup> The systematic study of individual

voting in American cities began in earnest only in the late 1950s. 6 And it was around the same time that American political scientists first undertook to study in depth the power and decision-making processes of large cities.7

However, the conversion of urban political science to behavioralism, when it finally came about, was abrupt and nearly complete. As if consciously taking up Herson's call, urbanists began to devote themselves almost exclusively to the scientific study of city politics. While much of this new research was devoted to the analysis of particular public policies, a significant portion was also aimed at developing and testing empirical *theories* of urban politics, focusing largely, though not exclusively, on the question of community power. Edward Banfield's important study of Chicago politics was followed up by Robert Dahl and his students whose research on New Haven was, in turn, supported or criticized by a host of studies, all of them of course empirical in orientation.8 Other researchers extended our knowledge about political participation in urban areas, generally focusing on urbanization itself as a causal factor.9 Still others examined variations in the structure of city governments, explaining them or their consequences with reference to the demographic and/or cultural characteristics of urban areas.10 And finally, an emergent school of thought, loosely derived from the human ecology tradition of sociology, sought to develop an empirical theory of urban political behavior based on spatial factors.11 Indeed, it is clear that by the late 1960s Herson's lament was genuinely obsolete: urban political science had become overwhelmingly "behavioral."

But the behavioral revolution tended to supplant, not merely supplement, the normative approach to urban politics. This is not to say that normative theorizing about the city ceased altogether. It is to say, however, that prescriptive writing was, for a period of several years, very nearly invisible. The precise reasons for this can only be guessed at. Scholars who might otherwise have devoted themselves to normative or philosophic research may well have turned their energies instead to empirical/scientific investigations. Those writers who did persist in their normative concerns may have simply been ignored by colleagues preoccupied with gathering data

and testing hypotheses. More generally, we can point to the obvious attractiveness of an urban political science for specialists eager to catch up with the rest of the discipline. Indeed, this attractiveness was enhanced by the fact that urban political systems could be fruitfully considered microcosms of political systems in general—manageable, researchable, relatively isolated units in which the essential processes of all politics could be identified and documented. 12 In any case, the study of urban affairs was, for a number of years, bereft of the kind of normative discourse which is, I would suggest, the lifeblood of any systematic inquiry into politics.

It is an essential premise of this book that there has once again been a significant shift in urban-oriented political science, a partial turning away from behavioralism and a rediscovery of normative questions. In the past decade and a half, the study of urban politics has once again recaptured something of its prescriptive focus. The problem of how cities *should* be governed has regained its place in importance beside the question of how they actually are governed. Numerous monographs and articles have been written offering solutions to our cities' problems. These writings are widely discussed. They have generated a good deal of controversy, raising questions about the purposes of urban government, influencing federal policies toward the city, and generating in the process a large volume of related empirical research. If Herson's "lost world" has long since been discovered and surveyed, then we may suggest that the normative contexts of that world, its moral and intellectual contexts, are now being delineated and assessed.

This resurgence of normative thinking about urban politics is attributable to a variety of factors including intellectual, historical, and political factors. Intellectually, one must point above all to the declining authority of behavioralism in American political science. Again, the predominance of behavioralism is utterly beyond dispute. Nonetheless, its claim to exclusivity began to wither somewhat under a steady barrage of attacks during the 1960s. These attacks took a variety of forms. One argument concerned the degree to which the procedures of the physical sciences could be appropriate for understanding social and political phenomena.

Critics of behavioralism, relying on the interpretive or hermeneutic lessons of Dilthey, Weber, and Schutz, argued that human or social facts could not be reasonably reduced to mere physical and quantifiable bits of data and, therefore, could only be comprehended through a variety of empathetic techniques associated with the term *verstehen*.<sup>13</sup> These critics received considerable sustenance from those who argued that the physical sciences themselves do not really proceed according to the rigid canons of the "scientific method." The so-called Kuhn-Feyerabend thesis, which suggests the noncumulative nature of scientific knowledge, was perhaps most influential in this regard.<sup>14</sup> Also insightful were the writings of Stephen Toulmin, who persuasively described the intuitive, imaginative processes of scientific discovery and concept formation.<sup>15</sup>

The main intellectual criticism of behavioralism, however, has been that the separation of facts and values an essential tenet of the traditional scientific method is unnatural and, in fact, impossible. The Kuhn-Feyerabend thesis was fruitfully combined with the sociological work of Karl Mannheim and others to demonstrate that all knowledge is socially-located and, hence, a function of particular purposes or interests. From this it could be persuasively argued that much behavioral research in fact emanates from, or is at least supportive of, certain implicit value positions.<sup>16</sup> The alleged separation of facts and values was thus shown to be a myth. Moreover, some critics argued further that the separation of facts and values, even if possible, would not be desirable. For the sterile and dispassionate collection of social facts would, by itself, amount to a betrayal of one's proper role as an active and committed member of the human community. Though these general lines of thought were by no means universally accepted, they were nonetheless among the reasons for the renewed interest in normative questions of urban politics.

A second source of this revitalization was largely historical or circumstantial in nature. I refer here to what may be called the discovery of the urban crisis. Of course, crucial in this regard were the incidents of collective violence that shook many American cities in the 1960s, most especially Detroit and Los Angeles. In a general sense, the riots served to revive the notion that our cities were in bad shape and that fundamental

changes in social policy were called for. As expressions of discontent and frustration, they led to a new emphasis on severe social problems and prompted new approaches to these problems on the part of social scientists.

The impact of the urban crisis upon political scientists was, perhaps, special. Empiricists had found, in study after study, that American cities generally had pluralist political systems based on processes of negotiation and compromise among competing group interests.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, these observers had also concluded for a variety of reasons that such systems were in fact pretty good systems, providing relatively stable, responsive, and responsible methods for making important decisions. Pluralist democracy was alive and well in urban America, and nearly everyone thereby benefited. The riots shattered this presumption. They served to show that such an enthusiastic picture of the urban political process was, at best, incomplete. In particular, they seemed to show that a significant portion of the urban population was in fact being left out of the decision process and was not benefiting adequately from urban public policies.<sup>18</sup>

At least two consequences followed from this. First, many urbanists were forced to revise their empirical theories of community power.<sup>19</sup> The pluralist model, especially in its simpler forms, no longer seemed to fit the facts, if it ever did, and thus new models or revisions of the old ones were forthcoming. Second, and more important for our purposes, the urban crisis reawakened scholars to the importance of normative questions. By suggesting the inadequacies of existing structures, however characterized, the riots of the 1960s prompted many political scientists to shift their attention from mere explication to some level of evaluation and prescription. The focus became not merely what *is* the case but also, and perhaps more urgently, what *should be* the case. There was, in short, a growing and still vital preoccupation with improving, rather than merely explaining urban political systems.

The third reason for the rebirth of urban normative theory was a political outgrowth of the previous one. Specifically, the urban crisis of the 1960s had an impact not only on academic political scientists but on government as well.

The federal government in particular began to turn its attention increasingly to the problems of our cities. This attention manifested itself in the vast growth of federal grants-in-aid to cities, and in the formulation of more or less explicit (and more or less publicized) programs for dealing with urban problems. Such activity made normative speculation about urban politics a more salient endeavor. For political theorists could, at least conceivably, have a real impact upon public policy. The reputed influence of Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, and the elevation of such urbanists as Edward Banfield and Daniel Moynihan to positions of apparent access and influence, undoubtedly contributed to this feeling. Urban social science mattered, its impact could be felt, and the mere fact of increased governmental involvement sowed the seeds of controversy. The writings of a Banfield or Moynihan, though inherently inflammatory, became even more so by virtue of their semiofficial status.

And thus we have witnessed, in the past fifteen years, a series of vigorous controversies concerning the nature of urban problems and policies. Phrases like community control, benign neglect, maximum feasible participation, black power, open housing, and revenue sharing have been the symbols of controversy in the corridors of power, in the mass media, and in the academy as well. I do not mean to paint an excessively simple or one-sided picture of the current status of urban political science. American universities and research institutes are populated with an abundance of scholars who conduct research from a wide variety of empirical perspectives. The concern with understanding how cities operate is by no means dead. Indeed, it is certain that the vast majority of published studies on urban politics still have primarily explanatory concerns, and that is probably as it should be.

However, the normative mood, so subdued in earlier periods, has now moved to center stage. The most interesting current writing on urban politics is deeply normative in its approach, writing that attempts to identify key problems and, more importantly, attempts to tell us what we ought to do about those problems. Of course, it is *ideological* writing in particular that is of greatest interest to us and that commands our attention. But what is ideology and how does it differ from

other kinds of political thought? It is to this more basic question that we now turn.

### Varieties of Normative Political Thought

Any effort to evaluate and prescribe political institutions and actions in terms of moral or ethical criteria we shall call "normative." But normative political thought is not of a piece. A newspaper editorial recommending a change in local election laws is, in a very real sense, an example of normative political thought. It is primarily concerned with prescription and moral judgment, as opposed to mere description and empirical analysis. But then, so too is Plato's *Republic*, or Aristotle's *Politics*, or Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. These latter, that is, share with the editorial a concern for what *ought* to be, rather than just what *is*. All must therefore be considered examples of normative political thought.

And yet, such cases are clearly so different from one another, not only in terms of intellectual worth but also in terms of style and content, that the simple phrase *normative political thought* would seem to be virtually meaningless without considerable qualification. We need some way of distinguishing and sorting out the intentions and structures of a wide variety of normative writings: a newspaper editorial, a Platonic dialogue, a judicial opinion, a party platform, a statement of personal faith, or a systematic and general treatise on political ethics. Scholars have in fact worked long at developing an adequate taxonomy of political thought, one that would not only distinguish the various kinds of normative writing from one another but, in addition, would further our understanding of political theory itself. Unfortunately, these efforts have met with mixed success at best.

One common strategy has been to distinguish "political philosophy" from "political ideology." There is, however, considerable disagreement as to how each of these terms should be employed. For example, in a widely read discussion, P. H. Partridge refers to political philosophy as that which attempts to connect conclusions about politics with some kind of wider (nonpolitical) philosophic system.<sup>20</sup> In other words, political philosophers have "tried to derive political and social

conclusions from more general beliefs about the nature of reality." 21 The implication is that political philosophies are essentially *descriptions* of underlying political reality, of the essence of politics. On the other hand, Partridge identifies ideology as all political thought that emphasizes ethical reflection. That is, ideology is concerned with "elaborating and advocating conceptions of the good life."22

Now this seems to be a useful categorization. For there does seem to be a certain class of especially "philosophic" thinkers whose political ideas are explicitly linked to general principles of philosophy. Plato, St. Augustine, and Hegel would be obvious examples. Unfortunately, however, Partridge's is by no means the only useful or attractive taxonomy we have. Thus, in a more recent discussion, Nannerl O. Keohane also distinguishes political philosophy from ideology. But her conceptualization is a rather different one, depending mainly on the quality or profundity of discourse.23 For Keohane, political philosophy seeks to "penetrate beneath or beyond appearances to a more basic reality, something more profound and lasting than that which can be immediately apprehended."24 In so doing, political philosophy is characterized by "abstract, higher-order, comprehensive statements about life" which may have metaphysical *or* ethical concerns.25 In contrast, ideology is characterized as merely a tool for the political partisan, "a shorthand guide to action," to be judged by its "utility for the performer in a certain situation, given his goals, his temperament, his opponents, his abilities, his allies."26

Clearly, "political philosophy" means one thing for Partridge, something quite different for Keohane. But indeed, the variations go far beyond this. For Leo Strauss, political *philosophy* is fundamentally moral inquiry about politics, whereas for John Plamenatz it is largely an analytic enterprise aimed at uncovering and solving problems of political language. On the other hand, Plamenatz describes political *theory* as "systematic thinking about the purposes of government," while Strauss uses this term when considering mere descriptions of the nature of politics.27 The term "ideology" has experienced an even wider range of diverse uses. It is variously understood as a call to action, an explicit and closed system of thought, a demagogic "short-circuiting" device, a justification for ex-

tremism, or a defense of the status quo. Indeed, for some writers virtually all social and political thinking is "ideological" in the sense of being socially-located. 28

All of this is, to be sure, very unsatisfying. Indeed, it may strike one as a rather silly spectacle, an endless game of semantics without real purpose or hope of resolution. Yet, some kind of classificatory scheme is absolutely necessary if our field of inquiry normative political thought is to make any sense. The efforts of Partridge, Keohane, and others in the analytic tradition have been, I would argue, extremely useful in uncovering some of the linguistic and conceptual puzzles surrounding such words and phrases as political philosophy, political theory, and ideology. If they have failed to *solve* such puzzles, this in no way suggests that their efforts have been wasted. Rather, and more simply, it suggests only that any classificatory scheme we adopt can at best be a stipulated one which makes rational sense, which takes into account linguistic problems, but which, nonetheless, can make no claim to being objectively true.

The typology to be used here borrows from those mentioned above, and identifies three types of normative political thought *political philosophy*, *ideology*, and *policy advocacy*. Two criteria are used to differentiate these from one another. First, *the types of normative political thought will be distinguished in terms of the aims and intentions that govern their production*. That is, they are distinct largely in terms of the purposes for which they are written. Especially relevant here is the question of *time-frame*. Some political writings are produced with specific and proximate events in mind, others with whole eras in mind, and still others for all the ages. An author who writes for all the ages is engaged in a very different kind of activity from one who is concerned only with current controversies; as a result the nature of his theory will also be very different. Second, *the types of normative political thought will be distinguished in terms of the degree to which judgments are based on explicit and systematically developed principles*. Many political writers postulate certain basic principles as merely given, or else presuppose them tacitly, even unwittingly. Others, however, refuse to assume such principles but, rather, seek to defend them rationally and comprehensively, arguing from well-defined premises to well-articulated