

Book Review

Innovation in Local Governments: A Review of Books by Terry Nichols Clark

Terry Nichols Clark, ed., 1994
Urban Innovation: Creative Strategies for Turbulent Times
Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

Terry Nichols Clark and Michael Rempel, eds., 1997
Citizen Politics in Post-Industrial Societies
Boulder, CO: WestView Press

Terry Nichols Clark and Vincent Hoffmann-Martinot, eds., 1998
The New Political Culture
Boulder, CO: WestView Press

Reviewed By Howard A. Doughty

During the past half-century, the field of local government has been especially fertile ground for social scientists interested in the workings of democracy. In addition to general methodological advance, there are a number of specific reasons why empirical researchers came to claim this bounty: (1) democratic theory began in the context of the ancient Greek *polis*, which itself established the standard against which many democratic ideals were tested, thus making the study of local government of enduring importance; (2) democratic practice sometimes seemed healthiest at the local level where elected officials are better known, issues are more immediate and a perception exists that community action can occasionally be effective, so a less contaminated version of democracy may be available for scrutiny; (3) research into political institutions and actions are simply more manageable in local arena than in larger units where complicating factors and research costs seems to grow exponentially,

So it was that studies of city governance, such as Edward Banfield's *Political Influence* (1961) and Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961), offered remarkable testimony to claims about the wisdom and virtue of modern (and especially American) democracy. Their respective studies of Chicago and New Haven fit nicely with trends in behavioral science at the time. The 1960s, sociologists will recall, began with Daniel Bell's declaration that we were witnessing *The End of Ideology* (1960) and Seymour Martin Lipset's earnest assurance in *Political Man* (1961) that it was no longer necessary for Americans to seek the good society; the United States was "the good society in operation." With some important exceptions such as Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure* (1953), official academia generally assented to such claims.

In the United States, as my old mentor Henry S. Kariel said in *The Promise of Politics* (1966), "the soothing vision of American politics as an interminable process which gives every interest its due" seemed plausible. As long as the system worked ("however meaningless the popular participation and however questionable the results"), academics and citizens could be forgiven for complacency. When,

however, urban decay, race riots, assassinations and a hideous war in Asia revealed fundamental flaws at every level of government, occasionally acrimonious debate arose about fundamental questions of democratic theory and practice. As the self-congratulatory consensus broke down, some of the most compelling arguments were over the question of citizen participation in, again, local affairs. Two issues in particular were hotly debated.

The first was an empirical question about the distribution of power. Was politics adequately described as a fluid system in which diverse interests vied for rewards in what was said to be an open contest, a friendly competition for a fair share of authoritatively allocated values? Those who said that it was were labeled "liberal pluralists."

Opposing them was a diverse assembly of "radicals," who were inspired by such writings as C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (1956) and who insisted that the reassuring civility of modern democracy masked a rigid arrangement in which a powerful few ruled an impotent majority, much of which was marginalized or wholly excluded from what Norbert Long famously called local politics as "an ecology of games."

Rarely heard were any who might have agreed that political life was in fact dominated by a cozy alliance between business and government but who thought that this was a much finer thing than mob rule. In an era in which the vocabulary, if not the reality, of democracy was almost universally praised, such unpopular beliefs were perhaps held by members of the elites but those elites saw little value in advertising their contempt for their fellow citizens. After all, in T. D. Weldon's terminology (*The Vocabulary of Politics*, 1953), democracy was a "hurrah" word, a term of unqualified approbation which had no definable meaning but which could be uncritically applied to those of whom we approved and withheld from those of whom we disapproved as a mere mark of our endorsement.

The second debate was over the normative question of whether or not public life was inherently laudable. Democratic theory from Pericles to John Stuart Mill and beyond held that participation in the affairs of the community was of intrinsic worth and betokened humanity's highest secular calling. Arguing against this view were those modern "realists" who saw politics as burdensome and intrusive on people's private lives, who contended that as long as genuine opportunities for involvement existed and as long as inequities were bearable, the basic tests of democracy were met and no urgent call for extended popular participation was required.

For a time, the debate between the smug liberal pluralists and the feisty participatory democrats enlivened professional journals and occasionally spilled over into practical politics. That time, it seems, has passed. The apparent triumph of the ideology of fiscal constraint in government at all levels and in increasing numbers of jurisdictions the world over has set a new agenda.

Among the more perceptive chroniclers of this phenomenon is Terry Nichols Clark, Professor of Sociology and Coordinator of the Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project (FAUI) at the University of Chicago. Author and editor of at least 25 books (so far), he presides over a considerable academic enterprise that seeks to chart the many dimensions of postindustrial society. He and his colleagues, in the three volumes under consideration here, have recognized: (a) the constraints now placed on the public sphere; (b) the acquiescence of politicians, bureaucrats and citizens alike in the increasingly limited domain of government; and (c) the political and cultural values that help explain not only the harsh views of the openly unkind and ungentle but also of "new" democrats from U.S.

President Bill Clinton to U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair to Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow to their legions of municipal counterparts. They are representative of a pragmatic blend of socially liberal and fiscally conservative ideas that combine to form an important element of something called the "new political culture" (NPC).

All chant the mantras of the information age. All yield to the hegemony of the market system. All accept (though few could sensibly describe) the relentlessly competitive global economy. All see the function of politics as the attempt to adjust to the emerging and inescapable "reality" of post industrialism with a minimum of social damage. All want lower taxes, less government and a greater reliance upon individual responsibility. As socialist apostate and former Ontario Premier Bob Rae recently pronounced in *The Three Questions* (1998), the choice we must make is not whether or not we will have capitalism but what kind of capitalism we will have.

In *Urban Innovation*, Clark and his associates report on the work of the FAUI, a venture costing more than \$15 million (US) at the time of the publication of this book five years ago. FAUI's main product is a survey, begun in 1982, of 1030 municipalities in the United States plus "analogous studies that are on-going in 38 other countries." The focus of the work is upon municipal decision making and financial policy. The prime subjects are mayors, chairs of finance committees, chief administrative officers, and so on. Since its launch, it seems that – like Topsy – it "jes' growed" until now it "has become the most extensive study of local government in the world" with innumerable spin-offs, links to other prestigious research institutions, an FAUI *Newsletter* and scores upon scores of articles and papers flowing from it.

Anyone nostalgic for the heyday of statistical analysis (before semiotics and deconstruction spun many a social scientist around a "postmodern turn") will find *Urban Innovation to be a joy*. FAUI researchers cheerfully apply correlation, regression, cluster and any number of factor analytical techniques to complex issues of urban politics. They generate stimulating hypotheses and produce some provocative results. Following are three examples.

First, Clark probes the NPC, a phenomenon that allegedly eclipses traditional "class" politics and substitutes an understanding of political that declares left-right polarities obsolete, distinguishes between social and economic issues (with social issues dominating), and brings diverse interests together on at least one thing – the need for smaller government. His conclusion: "Hierarchies spark political organizations, conflict, and ideological differences." Accordingly, "in cities with less hierarchy, more educated citizens, higher income, less poverty, and more high-tech service occupations" the NPC is strong. Apparently believing that the hierarchies that spawned class politics were the product of the industrial age and acknowledging his intellectual debt to Daniel Bell, Clark seems convinced that post industrialism will lead inexorably to the decline of hierarchies, the decline of the salience of class and a new politics built upon the NPC.

Second, among the purported implications of this finding is the idea that it is no longer possible to rely on "economic determinism" to explain or predict major policy decisions. His main illustration is the growth of anti-development lobbies that are, he maintains, anathema to business interests. Clark says that these lobbies reflect socio-cultural and not economic motives. So, instead of the analyses based on the belief that "business dominates government" as presented by elite theorists such as Hunter, he argues on the basis of studies in Seattle, Boca Raton, Boulder and Los Angeles (or, more accurately, the middle- and upper-middle class San Fernando Valley and the West Side) that environmental

concerns can successfully override so-called capitalist imperatives. In his examples, well-to-do homeowners successful fights against development measures that would, they believed, have increased population density, threatened residential property values, and undermined neighborhood amenities are presented as compelling evidence that class is a declining factor in the determination of local decision making.

Finally, Clark considers the general question of where innovative strategies emerge. The answer he provides is that it varies. Not only does he refute the notion that economic elites control governments but also the view that economic environments exercise a consistent influence. Affluent cities appear no different from poor ones in terms of their likelihood of producing innovations. So, both the idea that only wealthy cities (with ample fiscal resources and the flexibility to experiment) will innovate and the idea that only poor cities (that are so desperate that they must innovate or die) fail. For Clark, this "non-result" means that there is considerable opportunity for innovation regardless of circumstance. In terms of ethnic, racial, class, age, ideological, political party and other variables, Clark finds that "practically all relationships are weak in the United States."

So, what *does* matter? Given the weak constraints imposed by almost everything, "dramatic innovations are often feasible with minimal funding and by minimal staff." All that seems necessary is the power of the will. Says Clark: "U.S. leaders lead."

If leadership in an ideological, sociological and economic vacuum is able to fashion pragmatic changes in governance, it is plain that a new stage in the evolution of democratic politics has arrived. If end-of-the-millennium plutocrats can fashion a moat around their gate-guarded communities and call it the end of class politics, something else is afoot. Perhaps, as Clark, would have it, the end of ideology was only delayed; perhaps the good society is now in operation – at least in Boulder and in Boca Raton.

This is certainly the conclusion to be drawn from Clark and Rempel's *Citizen Politics in Post-Industrial Societies*. Once again, a mass of sophisticated statistical analysis is presented in support of Clark's theses. The decline of labor and the left is rehearsed. The homogenizing effects of the mass media and information technology in reducing the political cleavages based on class, ethnicity, religion and the like, is affirmed. As well, Ronald Inglehart, one of Clark's more consequential contributors, adds that "post-materialist" values (belonging, self-expression, etc.) are taking over from materialist values (physical sustenance and safety). While this shift is said to be most apparent in societies that display "prolonged periods of prosperity," Clark tells us that "there is no simple one-to-one relationship between economic level and the prevalence of Post-materialist values." The ease with which we are asked to slide from the materialistic Marx to the post-materialistic Maslow and remain obstinate in our refusal to take economics seriously is remarkable.

The setting for this profound change is not, of course, just the United States. It is shown to exist in a host of postindustrial societies. Building on the FAUI project but expanding into other data bases as well, Clark and his associates explore the NPC in countries from Canada to Sweden to Italy to Australia to Japan and to most others that can demonstrate the existence of an affluent middle class. Their conclusion is that environmental issues, feminism, gay rights, abortion and numerous "quality of life" concerns have created a new form of politics. The new politics is flexible, based on shifting alliances, and unfettered by comprehensive ideological attachments to grand theories of the left or the right.

The New Political Culture explores this transformation in depth. To begin, the NPC is comprehensively defined. In addition to the previously mentioned elimination of the classic left-right dimension, the separation of social and economic issues and the subsequent dominance of social issues, the NPC is also defined by: (a) a growth in "market and social individualism"; (b) a "questioning of the welfare state" including the recognition that "state-central planning is unrealistic"; (c) the rise of "issue politics" and the "decline of hierarchical political organizations"; and (d) the attachment to all these opinions by younger, better educated and more affluent individuals and societies. We are, it seems, to infer that the NPC (oblivious to the fact that merger-driven changes in the private sector are also heading toward "central-planning") is the wave of the future.

Once more, quantitative studies abound. Once more, international comparative data and interpretation are produced. We are treated, for example, to another study of the fight for "local growth controls" in the "zone of commuters" (this time in Orange County, California) where prosperous homeowners again fought successfully for their "back yard ecology and house prices. We learn also about the results of a comparison of governance characteristics and their implications for social policy in cities in 17 countries including the United States, Canada, France, Norway, Argentina, Slovakia, and Israel. We hear of an eight-nation study of partisanship in local politics and an analysis of the effects of materialist and post-materialist values on policy choices and spending priorities in four German cities. A discernible trend is made clear. Despite obstacles, the NPC is growing.

It must be stressed that this volume is by no means a polemic in favor of the NPC, disguised only by impressive charts and graphs. Contributor Hans Geser, for example, brings evidence from Switzerland that shows at least that there may be many paths to post-materialism. "Swiss leftist parties," he observes, "have proven to be quite receptive to new post-materialist values without discarding their more traditional class-related stances." None the less, he also makes it clear that this may simply be a feature of the transition between "old socialist allegiances: and a new era in which social and ecological liberalism will leave concerns about redistributive economic policies behind."

To summarize adequately (to say nothing of offering a sustained critique of this small sample of Terry Nichols Clark's contribution to the theoretical elaboration and empirical analysis of the NPC) would require as many pages or more than he and his colleagues have provided.

No such project tempts me. There are not enough years of life left for me or any other individual to undertake such a task, much less to perform it well. Instead, I will offer four brief comments.

First, Nichols and his associates have envisioned, articulated and achieved an enormous undertaking that, we may expect, is nowhere near completion. Research on this scale in any field has few peers and the enormity of the project is not daunting but (literally) awesome.

Second, those like me who have long lamented the disconnection between empirical and normative social science will find a model of enormous value in this work. While there is no shortage of clever statistical material nor of considerations of profound political issues in the extant literature, the use of quantitative techniques to investigate matters of genuine importance is to be admired.

Third, for those eager to find support for their adventures on the bridge to the new millennium, Clark's output provides succor. All that NPC celebrities (including U.S. Presidential hopefuls from Al Gore to George W. Bush) would have us believe that they believe is given an enormous boost here. From

extraordinarily detailed studies of small cities to broadly brushed national NPC landscapes, there is good news. True, there is a frank acknowledgment of some troubles ahead as the world moves from Marx to Maslow. Some abortion providers will be killed and some "people of colour" will be executed in Texas. The NPC does not imply the end of conflict as the rise of religious fundamentalism, xenophobia and skinhead culture attests. Still, working from the bottom up, Clark suggests that the number of new-style local politicians, from Mayors Diane Feinstein in San Francisco to Alain Carignon in Grenoble to Guy-Olivier Segond in Geneva, is growing. With them, he invites us to believe, come fresh approaches, opportunities for innovation and the dismantling of rigid ideological thinking as practically important as was the symbolic significance of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall.

Finally, I must express my reservations. One of the tested hypotheses in Clark's work is that "government programs (of the left) seek to redress socioeconomic inequalities. As inequalities decline over time, however, so should demands for more government." What remains untested is his comfortable assumption that socioeconomic inequalities are, in fact, declining. Indeed, the gap between rich and poor (both domestically and internationally) seems to be growing and the putative middle class in everywhere under threat. How easy will it be for Clark and his followers to continue to believe in the systematic reduction of inequalities as globalization, under the lead of the 500 top corporations (made even more powerful by the mergers that are daily reported in the business press), give the lie to talk about a decline of hierarchy? A decline, moreover, in the strength of trade unions may not indicate that workers have won equality but that capital has destroyed their only means of defence.

Another of Clark's frequently touted notions is the concern for ecology. Environmental issues are, however, declining in public opinion polls that measure the salience of specific social issues. Public policy, ever since the debacle of the Rio summit, has reversed the trend toward environmental regulation. And even in Germany, the Green Party endorsed the bombing of Yugoslavia which, apart from all other issues, resulted in massive ecological damage. According to the World Watch Institute, in 1998 not only did the world economy decelerate but global temperatures jumped dramatically to a record 14.57 C, the total carbon emissions from coal and oil increased to 6.4 million tonnes, and the number of agricultural pests immune to chemical control rose to almost 1,000 species. On the other hand, many people quit smoking. Is this inventory a cause for celebration?

Finally, I am somewhat amused by the reliance on victories by upper-middle class Californians over assaults on their residential property values as evidence that economic issues are now taking second place to environmental concerns. All that seems to be happening is that some very effective homeowners' associations have succeeded in keeping their back yards clean and tidy. Were similar studies of community groups in the lower class Latino neighborhoods of East or South Central Los Angeles to be conducted, I suspect the results would be different.

In short, there is no doubt that there is evidence for the NPC. However, just as the call for quietude in the works of Banfield, Bell, Dahl and Lipset, fell victim to the urban troubles of the mid- to late-1960s, so the ride into the 21st century may be a lot rockier that Clark and his colleagues allow.

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