PROTEST AND PERSUASION IN ASPIRING GLOBAL CITIES

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Instead of relying on traditional political divisions, both city governments and protesters rely on the tenets of branding.

Branding is an essential and understudied feature of urban politics.[1] To see why, consider the theoretically generative comparison between political and commercial communication in the urban dimension. Over the course of time, and across spatial variation, both of these social interactions have adapted to changes in technology and contextual conditions. In much of the United States, for example, until the late 1980's the political activity of precinct workers naturally fit in with the rest of the door-to-door sale economy typical of the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's. In politics, as well as in business, people (rather than ads) were used to sell. In the political arena, candidates and mobilizing structures were tightly bound to the neighborhood through patronage, whereby clients could be rewarded with benefits such as public employment, or punished with exclusion when they failed to deliver political support.

In recent decades, both commercial and political communication have changed dramatically. Increased political autonomy, coupled with a weakening of traditional programmatic parties and fiscal retrenchment, enabled a more fluid electorate, leading large-city mayors to shift from patronage-based mobilization to new forms of persuasion for both political competition and governance. As I showed in *Political Branding in Cities* (Pasotti 2009), instead of relying on party ideology and voter patronage, these mayoral candidates attract voters by shaping values – they develop a personal *brand*, a term derived from management where it refers to a product "made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values" (Hankinson and Cowking 1993, 10). Technological innovations greatly facilitated branding by lowering costs and increasing the repertoire of mass communication.

A similar shift occurred in protest strategies. Instead of relying on traditional political divisions, both city governments and protesters rely on the tenets of branding and increasingly build their connection with citizens by providing them with narratives and values that satisfy psychological needs for belonging, self-worth, or legitimacy. A surprising similarity emerges in

1. This essay partially relies on excerpts from Pasotti (2009 2020).

how protestors and city governments compete to shape citizens' subjectivity, with both sides embracing branding to mobilize support.

We can therefore no longer grasp the strategic dimension of political communication without taking seriously the role of branding, and examining how political actors persuade supporters – not through material exchange, but rather with the provision of specific emotional experiences.

Branding is ubiquitous in shaping political communication among both institutions and civil society. This is especially visible in cities, because urban centers are critical sites of *both* power *and* contention, where the shift from door-to-door mobilization to mass messaging is most evident. Centers of economic growth are overwhelmingly in large cities, and urban redevelopment has become a widespread primary growth strategy for cities (Glaeser 2000; Sassen 1994). Yet, cities are also key sites of protest; one reason for this is that urban institutions shape how civil rights are actually distributed and regulated. As Miller and Nicholls remind us, for instance, a constitution might grant freedom of religion, but city officials can limit the exercise of that right by restricting the construction of worship sites with zoning regulations. Or, local zoning regulations for housing or transportation can be designed to sidestep equal-rights provisions devised by a national government. In this way, countless "governance practices make cities key arenas of struggle shaping how rights are distributed, implemented, and violated" (Miller & Nicholls 2013).

As the examples above indicate, and political science scholars have long argued, power in cities is predominantly expressed through land use and redevelopment, as cities compete to maximize their economic standing (Logan & Molotch 1987; Peterson 1981; Stone 1989). Coalitions composed of business, cultural, and governmental elites maximize rents and land values to capture the benefits of growth (as opposed to for example prioritizing neighborhood and environmental protections), resulting in empirically ubiquitous "development regimes" (Altshuler & Luberoff 2004; Logan & Crowder 2002). Over the past two decades, these political patterns have intensified as city governments worldwide have shifted from facilitators to initiators of systematic redevelopment (Smith 2002; Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans 2007), to the extent that much scholarship considers "contemporary urban policy to be a form of state-led gentrification" (Lees 2003, 62).[2]

Therefore, redevelopment and its associated displacement provide an especially suitable theoretical and empirical area for the inquiry into the connection between branding and politics at the urban level. Not only is redevelopment the most common and influential policy expression of large city governments, its planning explicitly involves public and private actors. Further, planning choices are likely to reflect municipal priorities more reliably than other policy areas, making urban planning more amenable to international comparison.

The inquiry into branding as a key dimension of political communication is focused on aspiring global cities with regular and competitive elections because this arena most acutely expresses the politics of branding, and the tensions behind redevelopment and displacement. Aspiring global cities share an approach to urban political economy that is widespread

2. Gentrification involves at least four key elements: (1) reinvestment of capital; (2) local social upgrading by incoming high-income groups; (3) landscape change; and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (Lees, Slater, & Wyly 2008).

but not universal, and characterized by urban governments that prioritize economic competitiveness. Competitiveness involves a complex array of policies largely oriented toward attracting investment and high-skilled labor on international markets. No single or even handful of measures can entirely capture the phenomenon, but existing indexes can be used to identify aspiring global cities (in my research I combine GaWC [2012] and EUI [2012]). Leaders in these cities are integrated into circuits of international competition, ambitious to raise their global status, and under pressure to identify and pursue high rent-gap areas for redevelopment. These factors make aspiring global cities especially theoretically salient and greatly assist in establishing comparability, even with extreme cross-regional variation.

Mayors in aspiring global cities

Mayoral candidates adapted to new conditions by shifting from precinct-based patronage to broader messaging. Showing the power of the parallel between commercial and political persuasion, they emulate marketing mavericks. Marketers draw consumers – and mayors, voters – by associating their campaigns with experiences and values to which people aspire.

Brand management capitalizes on the fundamental role that emotions play in shaping political views, cognizant that the latter are driven more by emotional processing and intuitions than calculation and reflection. Successful brand politicians therefore engage the heart before the mind of their voters. They create associations between themselves, leadership, and good government that are so powerful they can mobilize support in previously untapped constituencies, as well as across cleavages, thereby weakening traditional organized opposition.

These emotional bonds allow political candidates to sidestep opposition promises based on material interest. To illustrate, Bogotá voters trusted mayor Antanas Mockus (1995-1997 and 2001-2003), to the point where nearly 70,000 met his invitation to pay 10 percent *more than owed* in taxes in order to support his policy implementation (Pasotti 2009).

While most cities continue to operate as growth machines, urban redevelopment recently tilted toward cultural and consumption-based strategies as governments increasingly focus on downtown recreation as the core of urban growth. The change reflects an identification of the knowledge economy as the main site of competition for global cities, which prescribes a shift from simply attracting investment to attracting and retaining a mobile population of highly skilled knowledge workers with amenities that this "creative class" prizes (Florida 2002). Florida's revolutionary growth prescription, quickly embraced worldwide, changed urban capitalism. Branding emerged as the key dimension, because politicians aimed to actually shape popular urban consumption. No longer just an illuminating parallel, commercial and political persuasion actually converged.

This growth strategy also launched a new wave of redevelopment because the promotion of creative industries required socio-spatial transformations to provide experiences and leisure facilities that cities could market as hip and vibrant. Brand mayors sought constituency support for transformative urban redevelopment through marketing operations that augmented their personal cachet in conjunction with the status of their cities. Mauricio Macri's government in Buenos Aires (2007-2015) offers a powerful illustration, as he imported brand management expertise from his previous stint

as chairman for Boca Juniors, an internationally recognized football team. Government and place branding overlapped and reinforced Macri's brand, down to the choice of golden yellow, Macri's signature color, for all government communication, buildings, vehicles, and venues. The brand invoked Buenos Aires as the cultural capital of Latin America, a message sustained by an explosion of city-sponsored cultural initiatives aimed to raise the city's international profile (often at the cost of local underprivileged cultural consumption).

On the other side of the world, Seoul mayor Lee Myungbak (2002-2006) provided a similarly striking example when he moved city branding from an ad-hoc approach to a longer-term strategy. Lee connected his multiple iconic environmental interventions and Seoul's natural and cultural heritage through the slogan "A Clean And Attractive Global City." The campaign raised the city's profile, dramatically increasing tourism and making Seoul the fifth city worldwide for convention visitors.

Despite the different contexts, Macri and Lee shared an emphasis on branding and urban redevelopment. Typical of brand mayors, they built support for projects by branding them as key to the city's future, thereby defining the legitimate urban experience, the legitimate land use, and the target consumer and worker. For example, working-class neighborhoods were re-proposed as sites for gourmet dining, contemporary art, or high-tech hubs. The effect was a rise in global city rankings and a bond with voters that catapulted both mayors to the presidency of their country - a glaring indication of the effectiveness of this political strategy.

Yet, these changes in urban governance have increasingly been matched by changes in resistance. Governments seek support and legitimacy to pursue redevelopment plans, while protesters seek support and legitimacy to resist them. Governments and dissenters alike have reacted to the decline of traditional means of consensus building and mobilization by engaging in forms of persuasion that target the individual citizen and are less mediated by political institutions. Both use communication strategies that include post-political images and slogans and exclude conventional political messaging. Although these strategies have deep redistributive consequences, in rhetoric at least they often transcend previous cleavages of contention.

Protest in the political branding era

To understand this shift in protest strategies, we need to consider the deep and widespread political, social, and technological changes of recent decades. Mobilizing structures that supported social movements until the 1980s no longer offer the same ideological, material, and organizational resources. Unions have declined in membership and influence (Baccaro & Howell 2011; Murillo 2001). Programmatic mass parties of the left and far left have entered a protracted phase of deep crisis (Huber & Stephens 2001; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke 2012). In some countries, austerity policies have given rise to new protest parties (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca 2017). Yet the overall decline in references to class and labor facilitated a new, more individualized language in protests in line with fluid and atomized participation (Tarrow 2013). These dynamics introduced significant obstacles to mobilization. While distinct populations may suffer common grievances, they are fragmented because people lack and sometimes even reject membership in "integrative

structures" such as unions, parties, churches, or political groups that traditionally offer collective identities, resources, and organizational structures (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

These tectonic shifts are evident in urban redevelopment struggles, where essential elements of contemporary capitalism, such as conflicts over consumption, cultural production, and spatial access, are revealed. Usually, communities facing redevelopment are too disadvantaged to mount organized protest. It is important to examine the cases in which residents *are* able to engage in resistance, especially among underprivileged communities, because they are both rare and theoretically unexpected.

In *Resisting Redevelopment* (Pasotti 2020), I show that protesters have adapted by deploying a set of instruments that I call "experiential tools." Parallel to the strategic shift observed with the embrace of personal branding by mayors, this addition to the repertoire of contention (Tilly 1976) includes a wide range of activities designed to attract supporters by offering experiences that their targeted participants will consider defining and transformative. Participants are attracted to action by the psychic benefits of participation, often unrelated to the political goals of the protest; and persuasion happens not through speeches but rather through experiences and self-discovery, in which emotions play a key role. Experiential tools can take many forms, but they are all instruments by which organizers seek to define and shape a community of participants. They often take the shape of neighborhood festivals or similar communal events with hedonistic elements, and are sometimes combined with squatting or encampments. These activities attract large and diverse audiences, displaying clout and legitimacy to opponents and allies alike. As experiential tools

have gained traction, artists have emerged as key economic and political actors due to their comparative advantage in creating seductive values and identities.

In cities where traditional mobilizing structures still offer notable support to protestors, experiential tools are less impactful. In Melbourne, unions have a tradition of joining protest actions at the request of and in support of resident groups, engaging in green and black bans that disrupt redevelopment. In Buenos Aires, unions are relatively strong, and organizations such as the Movement for Renters and Occupiers are actual union chapters – a linkage that provides renters and squatters with exceptional organizational and mobilization resources. However, in most cities, unions are either weak or likely to side with redevelopment. Here, experiential tools can be a critical protest tool.

Experiential tools do more than fill the gap left by union organizing, however. The shift from an industrial to service sector economy has important repercussions for contentious politics, because – especially in aspiring global cities - potential protest participants are more likely to be service providers. This means that they are inherently involved in the creation of experiences, whether for businesses (e.g. in financial services or infrastructural support) or for consumers (e.g. in entertainment or education). By the very nature of their jobs, service sector workers share a deep understanding of experience provision and therefore constitute an especially well-predisposed audience to be persuaded by experiential tools. Service sector workers and the creators of experiential tools, in a sense, speak the same language.

Experiential tools are not entirely new to social mobilization, but they are understudied, increasingly prominent, and remarkably effective

at providing residents with political influence over redevelopment. What sets experiential tools apart from conventional moments of celebration in protest campaigns is that they are not the *result* of campaigns, as scholars have observed in the past, but rather the first *tools* of mobilization, deployed to grow and shape the base of support.

Experiential tools are not by themselves sufficient for successful mobilization. They are most effective when combined with significant prior protest experience or dense organizational support networks – two variables long associated with mobilization. In over twenty-nine cases of protest in ten large cities across six continents, I find that the combination of experiential tools and either organizational networks or protest legacy emerges as necessary and sufficient for successful mobilization, even absent union support.

Experiential tools manifest in four specific categories. Organized events are the most prominent type, as successful groups set out calendars packed with occasions for residents across different social groups to come together. These typically light-hearted events, such as concerts, screenings of a documentary about the neighborhood, puppet shows, or communal meals, declare the appropriation of space by neighbors against the use intended by city government.

Grassroots archives are a second type of experiential tool. For example, in Santiago, residents came together in "memory workshops" to construct the history of the barrio and elaborate its cultural significance. The resulting "heritage registry" consisted of an archive of local family histories, combining architectural with emotional heritage – a critical linkage to legitimize, and thereby anchor, residents and small busi-

nesses in the neighborhood as they sought (and obtained) a heritage status declaration to stop redevelopment and displacement. The local archive included a barrio newspaper and other media, and culminated in the opening of a community museum. In a similar vein, protesters in Hamburg devised an Archive of Desire, composed of ballot boxes allowing residents to express their collective aspirations for a threatened public space. A public housing estate in Toronto illustrates experiential archives with a "memory wall," developed as part of their Heritage Plan, which was meant to identify and communicate key historic, cultural and social references in order to integrate them in the redevelopment of the estate.

Two final types of experiential tools are neighborhood tours and artistic performances. Both rely on the contribution of cultural producers and offer important platforms to attract media and institutional attention, as well as solidify mobilization. They often set the issue of redevelopment in an ironic context and offer a new way to talk about displacement, with a defamiliarization that stimulates awareness and criticism. Most of these interventions are not cast as explicit protest, yet they constitute protest because they represent a conscious opposition to city plans.

Protestors' experiential tools engaged with mayoral governance strategies in striking fashion. For example, in Hamburg cultural producers skillfully deployed the government's own branding discourse to acquire Gängeviertel, a large complex in a prime downtown area. The city had sold the lot for redevelopment – yet after protest, it purchased it back at a loss and gave it to protestors. Gängeviertel was gained through an occupation that was staged through an extremely smart experiential tool: an art

installation surprisingly turned, at the end of the evening's event, into an "art-squat." Police would have had to remove works of art rather than people, and this proved politically unsavory given the government's much-heralded embrace of culture-led growth. Protestors, based in the city's alternative artistic milieu, devised the catchy slogan "Komm in die Gänge", a play on words that means both "Come in the Alleys" and "Get Moving." Their campaign was connected to a slick counter-branding campaign called "Not In Our Name, Brand Hamburg" which reverberated nationally and internationally, and in which cultural producers stated their refusal to be pawns for the neoliberal culture-growth branding of the city.

Typical of experiential tools, organizers emphasized grassroots control and activities with broad appeal. Squatters provided workshops, laboratories, and open spaces with low rents. Amateurs and professional artists were invited to utilize space next to each other, to produce an interesting, animated, and functional cultural center. This inclusivity extended to children, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, students, and freelancers interested in the arts. Network activation went well beyond the anarchist artist scene, as the group began to collaborate with art institutions throughout Hamburg. The innovative strategy was summarized by a leading activist: "We are less militant. We occupy with paintings. We protect ourselves with art. We try to get through differently, without black masks, by gaining sympathy instead" (interview with Nicole Vrenegor, journalist and activist, Hamburg, July 29 2011).

This protest network launched several legislative initiatives, including rent caps, decriminalizing squatting, and eliminating discrimination against foreign-born applicants in public housing assignments. The campaign also influenced city electoral outcomes. Yet, developers also learned to appropriate experiential tools from activists, for example by plastering walls with posters that in aesthetics and language emulated the protestors' image-making. Passersby had to focus closely to recognize that the funky graphics and hip slogans in support of the project were sponsored by the developer's marketing campaign, and not by opposition activists.

A further example is found in the Mullae Artist Village in Seoul, a decaying metalwork hub that recently attracted a vibrant artist community. Redevelopment and displacement in this area were prevented by using experiential tools for an extensive public outreach that legitimized the artists' place in the neighborhood. As in Hamburg, the protestors' discourse was persuasive because it paralleled the city's own growth discourse. The narrative of revitalization through the convergence of industry and culture fit with an official position shared across the political spectrum. Both the leftist mayor Park Won-soon and the conservative president Park Chung-hee visited the Art Village in 2013, meeting with artists and ironworkers and praising the neighborhood as a model of an artist's haven and artist-led regeneration. Just as the city branded Seoul as a hybrid of tradition and modernity, the artists' narrative highlighted the ironworkers' endangered historical legacy, and revived it through their innovation.

Branding is indeed an essential feature of contemporary urban politics. City governments rely on branding to legitimize and build support for their initiatives. Opponents find that branding, and especially experiential tools, are critical to raising awareness, including building collective

place-based identities, fostering participants' commitment, publicizing concerns, and displaying political clout to allies and targets – all key steps in a struggle's mobilization and impact. Mobilization without the remarkable inventiveness and attractiveness of experiential tools faces obstacles that only significant institutional support can overcome. Thus, experiential tools are especially precious to groups that lack such institutional connection, or that are new to protest – characteristics that are common among vulnerable residents facing evictions. ●

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