



Methodological and Ideological Options

Re-framing the urban blight problem with trans-disciplinary insights from ecological economics



R.C. Weaver*

MS GIS Program, University of Redlands, 126 Lewis Hall, Redlands, CA 92373, USA

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ABSTRACT

Similar to circumstances in the field of economics, market fundamentalism dominates urban blight policy spaces in the U.S. despite criticisms of the paradigm. Unlike the unified alternative that ecological economics (EE) provides to conventional economic theory, however, disagreement over the meaning of “blight” has prevented a commonly held pre-analytic vision and policy agenda from forming in critical blight scholarship. This paper asserts that “applied EE” offers a framework in which to develop such a vision, and to strengthen the inchoate critical blight policy stream. We draw on the EE theory and concepts to argue that blight can be understood as a stock that accumulates in an urban system as a result of underinvestment into real property. Our conceptualization of the problem has several important implications for public policy. A brief illustration compares the relative efficacy of one city’s characteristically neoliberal blight policies with more “EE-consistent” policies in a second city to show that the latter might in fact outperform the former.

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1. Introduction

What, if anything, can critical urban scholars in search of better blight policies learn from ecological economists? Likewise, what, if anything, can ecological economists attempting to influence economic and environmental policies gain from urban blight researchers? At the outset these seem like odd questions to ask. The two fields are ostensibly unrelated in subject matter, scope, and, as ecological economists ought to appreciate, scale. For example, the overarching goal of a steady-state economy is surely more complex, interdependent, and macroscopic in nature than the goal of a blight-free city. Additionally, the former goal necessitates finding ways to balance global collective socioeconomic activities against the objective properties of the physical systems that sustain and contain the world economy; whereas the latter, insofar as blight tends to be a subjective concept, requires coordinating local collective decision-making in ways that satisfy the heterogeneous preferences of a given city’s residents. Hence the challenges confronting each end are highly incongruent.

Nevertheless, it is claimed here that where the two diverse areas of research potentially share swaths of common ground is in their erstwhile limited capacities to facilitate enactment of public policies based on pre-analytic visions that are markedly different from each field’s respective “conventional” approach. Consider first the case of ecological economics (EE). Despite its well-established foundations and growing popularity in academia (Costanza et al., 2004), the trans-discipline is

largely absent from the American policymaking arena (Farley et al., 2007). Indeed, U.S. public policies are crafted predominantly within a market fundamentalist political discourse that emanates from the neoclassical economic paradigm (Boezeman et al., 2010). As a result, American economic and environmental policies are geared toward the market-based goal of efficient allocation, while essentially overlooking the primary and secondary EE policy goals of sustainable scale and just distribution (Farley et al., 2007).

Farley et al. (2007) suggest that this “failure” of EE to break through the U.S. policymaking glass stems not from having the wrong (or wrongly prioritized) policy goals relative to the citizenry, but from a meaningful disconnect between how those goals are communicated scientifically and politically. The source of the disconnect can be spelled out using Kingdon’s (1995) policy window framework, in which problem, policy, and political streams are said to converge and “open the window” for policy change. Expressly, elected officials recognize mismatches between ideal conditions and the status quo by interpreting indicators, focusing events, and feedbacks from society. Informed actors then advocate for their favored solutions to these problems within “policy communities”. The mood of the electorate, election results, and efforts of interested parties then codetermine which problems are most important, and feasible, with respect to the incumbent political landscape. The political stream then translates the most effectively articulated and politico-temporally relevant proposals into policies (Kingdon, 1995).

In this context, Farley et al. (2007) observe that the current of the EE political stream lacks sufficient strength to meet its relatively more forceful policy and problem counterparts at a confluence to open a policy window. Stated in a plainer language, although EE is grounded in sound science, which, in turn, enables its adherents to understand

* Tel.: +1 909 748 8525.

E-mail address: russell_weaver@redlands.edu.

problems and prescribe policy solutions, ecological economists have so far en masse lacked the political capital and dexterity needed to turn problems into debates on legislative floors, goals into agenda items, and ideas into regulations. For all intents and purposes, the reach of the trans-discipline has yet to cross into the art of political communication.

Now take the case of critical urban studies as the body of research relates to blight. In spite of scholarly criticisms to neoliberal urban policy instruments in general (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), and critiques of neoliberal urban blight strategies in particular (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), market fundamentalism is the ruling paradigm in the blight policy spaces of most U.S. cities (e.g., Weber, 2002). Specifically, strategies such as “massive demolition programs...and subsidized developments” are celebrated for their alleged abilities to catalyze private neighborhood reinvestment (Accordino and Johnson, 2000). Large-scale urban redevelopment projects are believed to produce trickle-down economic effects in their proximate city geographies through raising property values and increasing esthetic appeal, and these effects are thought to incentivize neighboring stakeholders to correct local blight problems—“a rising tide lifts all boats”, as it were (Teaford, 2000).

Contrary to this trickle-down narrative, Swyngedouw et al. (2002) observe that large-scale redevelopment projects tend to be “self-contained, isolated, and disconnected from the general dynamics of the city”. In other words, they are rarely the blight solutions that they are purported to be. Given this line of criticism, what is, as EE is to neoclassical economics, the alternative?

At present there is no clear policy agenda held in common in the blight literature, and there is even murkier agreement over the definition of the phenomenon writ large. Blight remains a subjective and contested concept in the social and policy sciences (e.g., Breger, 1967; Brown, 2004). Because urban scholars do not subscribe to a shared vision or have common policy goals, as do ecological economists, a hampered blight policy stream has been outpaced by comparatively strong problem and political streams. Specifically, an eager political stream armed with ample blight funding from federal programs (e.g., the Community Development Block Grant in the U.S.), where programs exist because the problem stream of blight is well-known even if the phenomenon itself is not defined (Gordon, 2004), rely on the market-based practices ingrained in their institutions (e.g., Weber, 2002). The outcomes of anti-blight policies under these circumstances frequently involve piecemeal patterns of redevelopment (Gordon, 2008), political rent-seeking, and “public giveaways” (Weber, 2002).

The present paper is directed toward filling this gap in the critical blight policy stream with insights from applied EE. Our approach is to first propose an objective and replicable way to conceptualize “blight” in public policy discourses. We argue that having a consistent way to operationally define blight can help to minimize the problems associated with subjective blight declarations and political rent-seeking (Gordon, 2004). We then “apply” EE to the urban blight problem using tenets from the field to develop a decidedly contrasting view of blight management relative to the conventional approach. Next, we briefly examine blight dynamics in two cities. The first city’s understanding of blight is interpreted as characteristically neoliberal, while the second’s is more closely aligned with our EE vision. Although we eschew direct quantitative comparisons because of the two cities’ highly divergent histories and present circumstances, descriptive measures suggest that EE-inspired blight management likely has superior qualities relative to conventional neoliberal strategies.

The article concludes by claiming that recasting the urban blight problem within an applied EE framework is but one example of how EE researchers can begin to increase the presence of the trans-discipline in political discourses. Particularly, while EE has not yet gained a permanent place in U.S. policymaking spaces (Farley et al., 2007), developments in applied EE can become powerful sources of symbols, synecdoche, metaphors, and analogies capable of bolstering the trans-discipline’s political stream (Stone, 2002).

2. An “Ecological” Vision of Urban Blight

Prior to applying EE to the problem of urban blight, it is necessary to explicate the contested nature of the concept, and to discuss why that contestation makes blight an appropriate topic for this study. As it stands, having many differentiated, multidisciplinary interpretations of “blight” results in the problem being difficult to consistently quantify, empirically analyze, or efficiently govern. Local gaming of federal anti-blight funding programs for political ends, in the name of “blight”, tends to be the rule rather than the exception in practice (Gordon, 2004; Weber, 2002). It is therefore unsurprising that elected officials generally seem to prefer an ambiguous blight concept (Gordon, 2008). Yet where social science research often steps in to resolve such ambiguities, most urban scholars maintain that blight is a subjective idea held in the minds of local stakeholders, and it is merely a reflection of larger, more complex structural societal problems (Shlay and Whitman, 2006). Accordingly, despite recognition that subjective blight declarations can have disastrous policy outcomes in practice (Weber, 2002), the willful absence of an objective conceptualization in the literature may weaken the problem’s policy stream. To resolve this issue it is useful to fuse together the key areas of disagreement over the blight concept.

First, some researchers see blight as physical conditions—trash accumulation, boarded-up houses, broken windows, vacant structures, and overgrown lawns—that independently or collectively signal negative qualitative change in a given area (e.g., Krumm and Vaughan, 1976), and which tend to result from deferred urban property maintenance (Brueckner and Helsley, 2011). Other scholars view the phenomenon as the stage in, or a symptom of, the process of urban decline, such that it is more part of a structural problem than a set of conditions (Breger, 1967). Still others, particularly legal scholars, observe that “blight” in reality is a powerful policy and rhetorical device that legally authorizes local governments to fund or subsidize private economic development simply by declaring properties to be “blighted” (Brown, 2004; Eagle, 2007; Gold and Sagalyn, 2011; Pritchett, 2003). This fact places blight in a desperate need of the type of reconceptualization proposed here. That “blight declarations” in this sense allow municipalities to acquire and expend real property and public dollars at will reasonably generates demand for a problem definition that discourages or minimizes rent-seeking behavior among city officials (Brown, 2004).

To meet that demand, we turn to a classic portrayal of the problem. In an influential attempt to demuddle the blight literature, Breger (1967) identifies three “elements that unify the blight concept”: (1) nonacceptance; (2) real property; and (3) depreciation. Without question, these elements continue to permeate blight theory (Gordon, 2004; Hartshorn, 1971; Krumm and Vaughan, 1976; Shlay and Whitman, 2006) and practice (Robinson and Cole, 2007). First, property is tendentially recognized as the carrier of the blight disease. The literature suggests that blight results from “deficient reinvestment” into urban property (Brueckner and Helsley, 2011), meaning that it is real property which becomes “blighted” or is declared so by municipal officials. This view is reinforced in public policy, where, according to a recent national analysis of U.S. state-level blight statutes, all fifty states and the District of Columbia have blight legislation that incorporates property to some degree (Robinson and Cole, 2007). Second, depreciation is the transformative process by which property advances from an earlier [pre-deficient reinvestment], “acceptable” state of nature to one that is “unacceptable”. This transition, which concerns Breger’s third element, fuels the dispute over blight. When is a property “acceptable” or “unacceptable”? In other words, what constitutes “deficient reinvestment”?

While there is no consensus answer to this question, for operational purposes we argue that one can effectively equate nonacceptance with noncompliance. The Tiebout (1956) model of community selection postulates that prior to location decisions, individual households assay the bundles of public goods and regulations in each of a large number of

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